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## ABSTRACT

This publication is devoted to concerns surrounding the teaching and learning of writing, and offers resources and ideas for professionals, including articles, interviews with prominent members of the field, book reviews, and brief updates on research by the National Center for the Study of Writing and National Writing Project activities. Articles in the first issue include: "A Poem for Each Student: Creating Community in the Learning Factory" (Sheryl Lain); "Stories out of School: First Grade Family Journals" (Stephanie Terry); "The Letter Exchange: Balancing Responsibility in the Writing Classroom" (Margaret Perrow); "Writing History: Before and After Portfolios" (Stan Pesick); and "A Picaresque Tale from the Land of Kidwatching: Teacher Research and Ethical Dilemmas" (Jane Zeni). Articles in the second issue of this volume include: "When Third-Grade Writers Do Case Studies" (Janet Kiddoo); "Why Ronnie Wrote about Cars" (Bonnie M. Faiman); "Sam and Ansley's Story" (Ansley Dauenhauer); "Writing for the Rest of Us" (Art Peterson); "How To Practically Guarantee Poor Student Writing--Without Even Trying" (Diane Boehm); and "Literacy and Numeracy in a Changing Workplace" (Mark Jury and Mira Katz). Articles in the third issue include: "Clicking on the Icon: How Technology Helped Amplify Some 'Micro-Voices'" (Jabari Mahiri); "Energy Conservation: The Evolution of Experimenters' Workshop" (Alexa Stuart); "Real World Feminism: A Teacher Learns from Her Students' Writing" (Lisa Orta); and "The Perils and Pleasures of Teacher Research: Excerpts from a Journal I Never Kept" (Martha Dudley). Articles in the fourth issue of this volume include: "Location, Location, Location: A Way into Descriptive Writing" (Ray Skjelbred); "Picture This!" (Stephen Marcus); "Literature in the Classroom or 'Say Not the Struggle Not Avail'" (Jane Juska); "How Enzymes Act: Skit Writing in Science Class" (John Dorroh); "Logorrhea or the Dangers of Unprotected Lex: Confessions of a Word Junkie" (Charles Waterworth); "Muscle Car English" (JoAnne Dowd); and "Creating a

Work of Their Own: Skills and Voice in an Eighth Grade Research Project"  
(Robert Roth). (RS)

# **The Quarterly of the National Writing Project and the Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy, 1996**

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**Editors:**

**Peggy Trump Loofbourrow  
Art Peterson**

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# The Quarterly

OF THE NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT & THE CENTER FOR THE STUDY  
OF WRITING AND LITERACY

Winter 1996

Volume 18, Number 1



GETTING  
INTO  
HISTORY  
pp. 20-29



# CONTENTS

## *BUILDING COMMUNITY THROUGH WRITING*

- A Poem for Each Student:  
Creating Community in the Learning Factory  
SHERYL LAIN 1
- Stories out of School: First Grade Family Journals  
STEPHANIE TERRY 6
- The Letter Exchange:  
Balancing Responsibility in the Writing Classroom  
MARGARET PERROW 10

## *VIEWPOINT*

- Teaching Can Be a Novel Experience  
BOB TIERNEY 15
- Audience  
BENITA LITTLE 19

## *GETTING INTO HISTORY*

- Writing History: Before and After Portfolios  
STAN PESICK 20

## *CONNECTIONS: RESEARCH AND PRACTICE*

- A Picaresque Tale from the Land of Kidwatching:  
Teacher Research and Ethical Dilemmas  
JANE ZENI 30

## *NWP & CSW UPDATE*

36

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## A Poem for Each Student: Creating Community in the Learning Factory

by

SHERYL LAIN



The minute hand jumps. It's ten minutes before the end of the period. Almost of their own volition their eyes glance at the clock. Their hands move down to their backpacks, readying for the ring of the bell.

Sometimes as the moment approaches they jam up the classroom's doorway, ready for the signal to hit the halls. Out there, 1500 youngsters become anonymous. Their faces blank out. It's safer for the ego and the body to register little recognition, to seek no eye contact as they move slowly through the constipated hallways to the next class.

Outside they are on a conveyor belt that moves them down the halls, on to another work station.

Here they'll again abandon some of their reserve and smile guardedly at familiar faces as they work their way down long rows, flop down at their desks, unpack, and prepare to cope with 30 minutes of teacher talk.

Historians say we left the Industrial Age behind almost as quickly as we entered it, but you'd never know it by looking at secondary schools. Instead of reflecting the Information Age with learning communities and entrepreneurial students, schools remain stubbornly in the Industrial Age with their factory trappings of assembly lines, bells, foremen, and point systems. We build bigger and bigger schools, pack more and more kids into classrooms, and maintain as inviolate the pyramid hierarchy of power, with principals who are the generals and teachers who are the ground troops. Their weapons? The grade book, the point system, the red pencil bleeding on student work.

Research-based articles scream off the pages of magazines showing that smaller schools, lower class sizes, and learning communities are key to learning. Meanwhile, I teach English in a factory-style high school with 1500 kids, seven forty-minute periods, and a class load of 140 "products."



What can I do until the system either corrects itself or fails utterly? I use a formula I've acquired over my 25+ years of teaching, one I gleaned from both my intuition and my reading: Watch kids. Build community.

We read Paulo Freire and Sylvia Ashton Warner when they said that when learners use language meaningfully, they see connections between themselves and the world. We learned about kidwatching from the Goodmans and Marie Clay. We relearned John Dewey's ideas of personal wholeness from James Moffett when he said schools must attend to the development of the spiritual side of children.

We learned these things, but our schools didn't.

Since the factory school conspires against me and my students, I've had to cut the cackle and get to the point with the wave after wave of students who enter my room. But, despite the constraints, I seek

to create connections and community. With every class, no matter what the grade, no matter what the course title I've been assigned to teach, I write a poem for each of my students.

The quality of the poetry doesn't matter much to the kids. What matters is that I go to the trouble, that when my intuition is right, I catch and honor the essence of the human being. Yes, I want students to see and hear poetry as a genre. But more importantly, I want each child to feel her heart respond as she reads so she knows words have power. And using the poetry, as well as a toolbox of other techniques, I hope we create a warm classroom community.

I usually give the poems to the students the day we split for winter break. The silence is acute as they read what I have written. The color on their faces deepens and their mouths usually curve a little into unconscious smiles.

It's a holiday season, and gifts seem appropriate. Our "party" takes all period, for I ask each student to give gifts of words away too. I provide each student a brown paper bag and a pile of little pieces of paper. "Write a note to every single classmate.

Make the message specific, not generic.

Mention what you notice, admire, remember, appreciate about each person. Also, write me a brief response about the poem I made for you."

After a flurry of comments and questions about the brown bag assignment, we all write feverishly so that we can get done before the bell. I'm usually still word-processing a few poems for kids I have later in the day.

By the end of the day, I have managed to create a poem for each student. Although of course one poem does not fit all, looking back I see that certain patterns have emerged, albeit with blurred edges.

Some served to clarify. Adolescence is a muddy time. "Who am I?" is every kid's unspoken question. For some my poems tried to clean the window glass, to brighten the light glimmering inside.

Some poems jolted kids. Yes, the poems were intended as gifts, but they were honest. They had to be, because kids detest and then discredit phoniness with a wave of dismissal. So, in the name of honesty, some tended to be a subtle — or obvious — kick in the pants.

And some poems reassured. So many kids stumble along in semidarkness, wondering if they're OK. If I honor their ambivalence, their words, their passions, then somehow they are honored.

Some students have responded with a sentence, and others, to my delight, with a poem.

### To Clarify

Sarahbeth with her long brown hair and blue eyes stepped unobtrusively into the room and slipped into her seat. The class quieted. Just her presence was like a calm hand stroking an antsy horse.

*Sarahbeth,  
a Southern belle's name.  
Sweet as sugarcoated drawl  
soft as shade-dappled skin.*

*She's not Wyoming  
bouncing over rocks  
catapulting into spring.*

*She moves sedately in a green world  
dropping white magnolia kisses on quiet ponds.*

To Mrs. Lain:

*You worked really hard on all these poems for everyone. That's something only you would do. I love being compared to magnolias and the South.*

Dan, a stoic Wyoming cowboy, worked summers on his grandpa's ranch fifty miles from nowhere. While his horse rested nearby, he'd string silver wire from fence post to fence post, completely at ease in the lonesome landscape.

*Dan rides.  
The Wyoming prairie is his business.  
Sagebrush brushes the underbelly of his horse  
scents the dusty air.  
Its memory lodges forever —  
a permanent definition of home.*

To Mrs. Lain:

*Thanks Mrs. Lain. You are right. All my memories are made of this.*

Jon figured he and I had nothing in common, I a self-avowed illiterate in sports.

*Jon —  
a sports lover.  
You name it:*

*soccer  
baseball  
basketball  
football  
hockey  
boxing*

*He knows and loves the games.  
Sports bracket his week.  
School's just one long commercial break.*

To Mrs. Lain:

*It was the truth about me.*

### To Jolt

Sarah was bruised. I learned her story. She was raped by a relative when she was twelve. Now she filled her weekends with parties where she was the main — bedroom — attraction. At school she pressed against boundaries, testing the edges of propriety and teacher patience. Any sugarcoated poem would be just another lie to Sarah.

*Sarah  
refuses every rule  
She snorted today — just audibly.  
I'd said, "Take the pass," when she asked to use the bathroom.*

*She considers  
rules ludicrous.  
Sarah.  
Some rules are required  
to stretch us,  
calisthenics of growth.*

*We need them to break.*

*When none are imposed  
we have no tension — like a stretched rubber band  
— to propel us forward*

*Without them, a vacuum.  
too much like death.*

To Mrs. Lain:

*Thank you for the poem. I was thoroughly flattered by  
the whole piece. You know all of us well. I respect that  
you take the time.*

Jude asked me every day if he should drop my "college-bound" English class — a distinction made not by me but by the guidance office. Some kids, especially those like Jude with foreign surnames, rasped against the grain when they jumped the "tracks" and took "hard" classes. In spite of my daily reassurance, Jude day-dreamed and worried more than he worked. More than anything, I wanted him to win this school game.

*Jude.  
Today at school  
an unformed lump of clay  
stuck in the mud of his own definition.*

*But inside  
a red-cloaked gypsy  
striding Zorro steps,  
an Arab stalking  
    through swirls of his sheep and women  
    cruelty curling his mustache  
    scarlet passion firing jet-black eyes.*

*Alas, a desk again  
so trivial a domain to contain  
his rich red blood.*

To Mrs. Lain:

*Thanks. It really sounds like me whether you knew it  
or not.*

Ohde. The only student I called by his last name. He hated me. The sludge moved in the air from his corner of the room. Why did he hate me? I have no idea. I guess antipathy happens whether the victim deserves it or not.

*I am not a bitch!  
I read your lips shaping the ugly word  
"bitch"  
for your companion  
sitting in the high seat of the parked pickup  
sunglasses and chrome reflecting me  
so cool.*

*Before my brain registered the insult,  
I'd smiled at you  
in greeting.*

*Now your sunglasses mirror  
my crooked smile slipping sideways  
down my face.*

### To Reassure

Amanda took modeling lessons and played a mean game of volleyball. Vacillating between these two worlds, she sometimes felt shy and insecure.

*At once a distant, untouchable beauty  
dressed in blond sweep of hair  
framing cool blue eyes.  
Stepping tall elegance  
she transforms the littered hall  
into a model's runway  
rich in perfume and silk.*

*Look again  
Amanda folds into a giggle.  
Curls caught carelessly atop blond head bounce,  
relaxed  
Elegance and distance  
dissolve into comfortable flannel shirt and friendly  
faded jeans.*

Amanda told me after winter break: "Hey, Mrs. Lain, my mom read your poem. She cried."

Joe was a druggie. He'd dropped out of the frenzy in the sixth grade — hadn't cut his hair since. Gone. I couldn't retrieve him from his self-imposed brain fog — to prove he was more than a digit in my room.

*I remember Joe  
knees out in violently redesigned jeans  
symbolizing selfhood*

*heavy metal music man*

*zoned sometimes in another form of reassurance  
that self counts in a  
numbers-for-people world.*

*sits  
easy access to escape from this cell.*

I recognized Dylan—a little boy caught by surprise in high school. He wasn't done playing and imagining fantastic alternatives to school.

*Dylan's  
off on vacation at his desk sometimes.  
He wants to write his own way  
no limits  
and his story of the gruesome, man-eating tree  
proves he should.  
He learned to be in la-la land at school.  
Elementary school  
forced him to color in the lines of very narrow  
hallways.  
Junior high  
combed his hair flat, taming boyhood cowlicks  
But in high school,  
this Halloween House of Horrors,  
he finally manages to have fun.  
Dylan's a Huck Finn grinning hero.*

To Mrs. Lain:

*What could I say about you?  
You shiver our minds  
with your internal rhymes  
making us think  
who is this lady.  
She's a swordsman  
with her red pen  
poking at our writings  
Dissecting our emotions  
to be transferred on paper  
She will be remembered  
when we leave  
telling our children  
she was our teacher  
to our minds.*

Ben and Joe came into my twelfth-grade composition class after a three-day detour with another regular-education teacher who said they were "too low." Fast friends, they limped along together through school holding each other up. I don't know what I did to deserve these warmhearted boys.

*So much depends upon Ben's and Joe's  
arrival in my room.  
In my daily rush they (Have you read  
Dragonlance Chronicles?  
Will we write stories in here?)  
ground me in purpose.*

*Later,  
in drydead politics of faculty meetings,  
Ben and Joe are life:  
blood against white snow  
dog's brown-eyed adoration  
evil and good locked in mortal combat.*

*Boys, I agree:  
I'd rather live in Dragonlance worlds than here.*

Joe's response:

*You want a rspnce. Im shock I relize the troubles and  
effotrs yo goe through to grade we, the student's,  
work. Your peace litturature holds enough truth to  
suprise me so I wrote one for you:*

*So much it means for us  
Mis. lains early arival  
Now in your daily rush you answer  
(Yes I've read Dragonlance Cronicles  
and Yes students do write story's in my class.)  
Mrs. Lain the new life of dead politics  
the very heart of our class.*

Ben's response:

*As Fizban was to the heroes  
of the Lance.  
mrs. Lain is to the everblossoming  
minds of all Central student's  
She battles the boredom of evil  
with pen and paper always saying something  
quaint to liven our spirits  
and make us laugh  
You truly have the makeings  
of a Fizban.*

When the holiday is over, is it my imagination or do my students' faces light up when they step over the threshold into my room? Do they begin to interact with one another more warmly, more aware of each other? Do they circle up their chairs with a stronger sense of inclusiveness, with more intense listening and exchanging? Toward the end of the year, might this classroom almost run itself?

These are questions with intangible answers. But at year's end when I ask students to write about what they remember about our year, I receive this kind of reflection:

*continued on page 29*



# Stories Out of School: First-Grade Family Journals

by

STEPHANIE TERRY



I am a parent and a teacher, and like others in this position, I have learned much about teaching from my child's teachers. In fact it was an experience with my daughter's teacher that converted me to the concept of the family journal.

I remember my excitement several years ago when Dhalya's teacher-tutor and I began to share a journal. Each day I'd read with interest not only the recap of the assignments they had completed but also the special notes and reflections that helped me feel good about sharing in my child's work day. This simple act of writing each day with a teacher who worked daily with my child was invigorating. I could identify immediately with her as a teacher "talking" to another teacher. But I was also a parent "talking" to my child's teacher.

Nancy Moore: Jan. 10

*... For Monday I'd like Dhalya to write a story on "A Walk." Please help her think of an interesting walk (perhaps one the two of you have taken) inside or out, including things seen and what she did.*

My reply: Jan. 16

*... We talked about our walks together and found a book on the Listening Walk.*

NM: Jan. 16

*... For tonight, please have her think out her story on "A Walk."*

NM: Jan. 17

*... We began "The Walk" story and will finish tomorrow.*

ST: Jan. 17

*We talked and wrote a story "Going For A Walk." She read it well and was pleased.*

NM: Jan. 18

*... I was glad you were able to communicate to Dhalya your real knowledge of her worth and beauty. Believe me it shows. For instance look at the really clever comparison Dhalya made in the walk story. I helped her report her ideas slowly and helped her sound out many of the words but all the imagination (as well as the good sentence structure) are all in her oral language now. I was really pleased.*

I began to wonder about my own first grade students and their parents. Using family journals, could we create the same kind of rapport as I had developed



with Dahlya's teacher? My students are all African American, and several come from low-income, single-parent homes. I wondered what I could learn about my students by corresponding with their families. What could parents learn? And what would be the problems — and the benefits? After four years of writing with families, I feel I now have some answers.

### Learning from Parents

Family journals offered parents the opportunity to share with me their concerns and expectations. Of course, some parent responses were brief and not particularly revealing; however, many parents wrote long, detailed letters. I was reminded that outside of school, parents and children lead complicated lives.

*My name is Jennifer Lee. I am Jamellah's mother. It's about 11:30 p.m. and I am just getting in from my part-time job. I am very tired. I have to unwind a little, then check Jamellah's homework, then help her to get herself together for school in the morning. Right after this I will get something to eat, take my shower and get into bed. In the morning, I will be at work by six o'clock. I get off by 3 p.m. in the evening. When I come home I check Jamellah's homework and sign it. Jamellah and I will drive down to her grandmother's to do an errand for her. We will then come home, eat our dinner, take our shower and get in our bed. So we will be rested for work and school in the morning.*

Jennifer Lee  
11-17-93

I often saw another side of children that was not apparent in the classroom.

*Shamira's first two weeks of school was very exciting. She could hardly sleep the first day of school and the day before school Shamira asked about 20 times what was she going to wear. She had took out all of her clothes that she was to wear for the first day. She even took out her book bag and notebook and pencil, everything was just in place so she could be very prepared, she did not miss a thing. I felt very happy for her so I often encourage her toward her educational goals. As time went on, she didn't show as much excitement as she did the first three days of school. She seem to me that she just started to lose interest in getting prepared for school. Sometimes she would whine and complain as if something was troubling her at school.*

*She also did not want to do homework. Sometimes if I let her go out and play she would come in afterwards and clean up and eat and fall asleep on the sofa as if she was so tired. So I would make her do homework before she went out to play and it would take her so long to complete it that she wouldn't have time to go out and play with her friend. This made Shamira very sad so she became very rebellious.*

*She started yelling at the least thing that happened in the household, she wrote on everything the walls, etc. She cut holes in the sheets on the beds. I had to hide the scissors because she would cut anything in sight. Boy, with temper tantrums and crying seizures it kept me in a very stressful situation. I became very tired at the least thing I had to do.*

*Being I am a single parent mother of four children, I have got to find time for the other three children ages 17, 15, 13, which is a relief they are older and can give me a hand with her sometimes. But there are times that they also give up with Shamira's rebellious attitude.*

*I truly believe this phase in her life will soon fade away. With God's blessing and mercy and my prayer's, she will adapt to this new experience of being more independent (as far as reading and writing, counting, etc.) and doing on her own the skills she is being taught at home and in school. As far as other activities and events, she and I usually go to church, sometimes movies very seldom though. We take long walks and shop together, visit relatives. These are things she loves to do. She loves to watch Pippi Longstockings tapes. Her favorite movie is "Look Who's Talking 1."*

Mrs. Green  
10-16-91

Parents not only alerted me to what was happening at home, but also to what was going on at school. Garry's family journal shares the unfortunate experiences of being teased by students from other classes. Garry was born with a degenerative hip disorder which resulted in stunted growth. Garry's mother wrote:

*I wish you knew that other kids have been calling Garry names because he is short. So that makes Garry feel so bad that he doesn't even want to come to school most days because he thinks that they will tease him again.*

Mrs. Helen Murphy  
1-9-94

As a result of these letters, I was more attentive to the special needs of each child. But parents also told me about their children's talents and progress:

Dear Mrs. Terry,

*In the last 2 1/2 months since my son Kenneth has been in your class he has changed drastically. In kindergarten, Kenneth did very little classroom participation. Whenever his teacher would call on him, he would shy away. Kenneth is a twin to his big brother Keith. He has a little brother, Denis, his mother and grandmother. We lived with his father up until the age of four. Kenneth is a shy tempered child who is also very smart. He loves to read and write and spell. With the help of his family, he can go a long way. Kenneth has not decided what he wants to become in life.*

*Sometimes he says he wants to play baseball, football, be a preacher or a police officer. Kenneth is more of a follower than a leader. I often tell him to be independent not dependent.*

Ms. Darlene Julius  
11-16-93

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### ***Family journals also offered me the opportunity to directly respond to parents' questions.***

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#### **Responding to Parents**

Family journals also offered me the opportunity to directly respond to parents' questions.

*The first two weeks of school have been very frustrating for me. If I could only figure out a way to have Shaneika do her home assignment neatly, my frustrations will be over. I truly appreciate as well as admire the eagerness Shaneika has in wanting to do her assignments alone. Only because it's the beginning of the year, I cannot lose my sanity. I have the faith to believe that this problem is well on it's way to being resolved.*

Mary George  
September 16, 1992

I wrote back:

*... It's really hard when you're little and you want to do things "All By Myself." Please don't give up!*

*Allow her to work a little bit on her own first, perhaps on a piece of practice paper and then on the home assignment sheet next. Try this and see how this works.*

Sometimes a parent's special concern would be embedded in the text of a longer letter.

*I am really satisfied with my son's progress in school so far. I am proud to say that now there are some books he can read from beginning to end and his math has really improved. There are more things that seem to interest him now than before school began. I also see that my son is more interested in animals, their habitats, and how they live due to animals in the classroom. I like that also. I am having only one real concern about my son's work and that is at times he writes backwards. Sometimes its just letters and then at times its entire words. Its only sometimes but it still bothers me. My son is really enjoying school and I don't think its because he's around children, a lot of his enjoyment is from the way he learns. He's not bored with school or learning, and he really likes his teacher. I think that the only way a child can learn is if the teacher shows that she's really concerned with the children and what goes on in the class and from what I see you do and I want to Thank You.*

Vivian Brunson (Jerold's Mom)  
October 29, 1992

I responded:

*Jerold is a delight. He's quick to share and demonstrates that he knows lots of "great things." I shall continue to work very hard to make sure he is ready for all levels of work. On writing backwards . . . sometimes this happens with first graders. Usually it's nothing to be alarmed about, however, I will monitor this in class. If we see it hindering his work, then I shall make some inquiries here at school about "taking a closer" look. Please continue to be involved in Jerold's learning. He really loves school and wants to learn.*

However, writing to parents was not only an opportunity to respond to concerns. A special bonus of the family journal was the chance to tell parents about my observations of their child's progress, as in my response to Candido's mother. Candido's mother wrote:

*On the first week of school it was a big experience for Candido and me because he really enjoyed himself.*

*Candido said the teacher is nice and the class is much longer. He got to meet new children and parents. On the second week, things got a little better because he got more adjusted. I really enjoyed the first and second week because he has homework everyday and it helps him to learn how to read and do math. I want to thank you very much.*

*Love You, God Bless You*  
*Rose Brown*

*Dear Mrs. Brown,*

*Candido adds so much to our classroom. He is a good thinker and is developing into a fine writer. It's really nice to see him stretching his letters and sounds out to write new words and ideas in his journal. We loved having "Audra Blue" [Candido's pet parakeet] in our class and can't wait for her next visit. Candido is learning to be quite a naturalist. I'm so glad that both of you are feeling comfortable about moving into first grade. Thanks for all of your help. Please use the journal to "talk" whenever you like.*

#### **Benefits and Problems of the Family Journal**

As these examples make clear, parent and family journals make possible a rich dialogue which may be used to bring authentic change to individual student programs. Parents and family members who wrote liked the idea of communicating with their child's teacher on issues other than behavior. I found that the level of trust continued to rise when we wrote together. Some of the barriers that are often erected between home and school were erased. Finally, the students enjoyed seeing their parents write in journals just as they did in class. It was now the students who calmed the "fears" of the parents with comforting words to let them know how journal writing did not have to be perfect writing. It was "ok" not to spell each word correctly and Ms. Terry would not use her red pencil to cross out their writing. She would respect their work too.

For me, these benefits outweigh the one major problem inherent in these exchanges: they require lots of time. During the years I used these journals, I was communicating with thirty or more families. Each journal required my "personal" attention; generic impersonal snippets would not do. I found that my all-too-optimistic time table of sending the journals home one week and responding the following week was impossible to maintain. A more reasonable time

frame of journal writing with parent and family members two or three times a year proved to be more successful.

But because I was willing to put in the time, parents became more confident in their communication with me, and a few began writing to the entire class, providing us with an extra gift. At our graduation ceremony, as children advanced from first to second grade, we shared a poem written by Michael's mother, Theresa Holmes:

#### *A Beautiful Black Bird*

*I can see you ... you're there  
Black as black can be, but you're shining,  
forming and creating new generations.*

*It may seem like you're flying  
high in the sky like a bird with no wings now.*

*But it is about to change.  
You will shine and continue to shine  
even when it begins to rain.*

*Oh you beautiful black bird,  
You mustn't get discouraged over trivial things.*

*Just continue to fly high in the sky  
as far as your wings can take you.*

*Now, go my little black bird  
fly, fly away.*

I like to think that the effort that the parents and I put into these journals helped not only the children but entire families fly higher and further.

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**Correction:** Connie Broderick's article, "How Do You Spell Caught?" which appeared in the Fall 1995 issue of *The Quarterly*, was reprinted from *Reflections on Teaching Writing II: Voices of Change from Pennsylvania's Writing Projects*, published in 1994 by the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

# The Letter Exchange:

## Balancing Responsibility in the Writing Classroom

by

MARGARET PERROW



It is 8:10 a.m. on a cold, rainy Monday morning in a basement classroom at UC Berkeley. Fourteen first-year students and I crowd around a small conference table. There is a little muffled talking, a little snoozing, several blank stares and a couple of expectant glances. Some of these students are athletes and have been up since 5:30 at football, track, or swimming practice. Others have apparently been awake the entire night, and 8 a.m. comes all too early. "Good morning," I say, self-consciously aware that my voice — energized by a full night's sleep and a brisk roller-skate to campus — probably sounds annoyingly energetic to them. But heads lift from the table, and we begin a discussion of the book *This Boy's Life*. On this morning, a guest might well conclude that I do most of the discussing.

As a college writing instructor, I struggle to balance the responsibility for learning between myself and my students — a significant challenge since I teach first-year students who hesitate to take charge of their growth as writers and have not yet learned to think about how they learn. Many are passive recipients of an education who feel themselves at the mercy of the teacher and the gradebook. As the semester gets underway, they ask, "Could you just tell me how to fix it?" and "Exactly what changes do I have to make to turn this into an 'A' paper?" "I didn't know what you were looking for," they complain. In class, body language signals passivity: a chair pulled away from the table, a baseball cap clamped over the brow, eyes that make no contact. They "forget" to complete homework assignments — or even to write them down in the first place.

In turn, I often feel overly responsible for my students' learning. It's the "I didn't do enough" syndrome again; I berate myself after each session for things I forgot to say, topics or skills we didn't cover, encouragement I didn't get around to offering. I obsessively draw up lists of things to remember to include in the next class meeting. Last year I instituted weekly printed assignment sheets so students would have no excuse for forgetting. I even asked them to date each item as they completed it and jot down any relevant notes about the assignment, an attempt to introduce "metacognition" into the process of completing assignments. When they didn't complete reading assignments, I blamed myself for overloading them. When they performed poorly on writing assignments, I blamed myself for not teaching them enough. When they came in bleary-eyed at 8 a.m., I felt responsible for their lethargy. Gradually I came to realize, however, the more I acted the control freak, the more I encouraged the passive behavior that was troubling me.

These issues were on my mind when I attended a Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) workshop last year. There I listened to Toby Fulweiler discuss the success he'd had using letters in his college writing classes. It sounded simple: He periodically asked his students to write to him individually, and he wrote back to all of them collectively. Might this be a two-part solution to my two-part problem of under-responsible students and over-responsible instructor? Letters, I thought, would encourage students to reflect on their own learning, to



take responsibility for their work both inside and outside of class. In fact, "the letter exchange" proved remarkably simple to implement, and looking back over that semester I can say that it did significantly shape the balance of responsibility for learning in my writing class.

Here's how it works. Every two weeks, I ask students to write me a thoughtful, typed letter about matters pertaining to the course. Students discuss their progress, voice their frustrations, comment on their writing processes, react to a reading, or ask general and specific questions.

I read the letters and respond in a single letter of my own, addressing their concerns. I often quote students in these letters, and try to respond to something from each letter. This is not as time-consuming as it may sound, since frequently several students raise related issues. My letter also gives me a chance to recognize and encourage students' work. At the beginning of the next week, I distribute my letter to the class and provide a few minutes of reading time.

### The Beginning

At first, students were confused about what to write and had difficulty describing how they learn. Writing about the class seemed strange. Some deflected responsibility, making statements like, "I really don't know what I'm supposed to write," while others wrote lengthy descriptions of their social and romantic tribulations or achievements.

For their first letter, I had asked students to tell me about themselves as writers and students. One student, whom I will call Jake, wrote the following:

*Dear Margaret,*

*I really do not know where to start so I am going to write freely like Peter Elbow [author of "Freewriting," which the class had just read] suggested. My name is Jake and I ... attend the University of California on a tennis scholarship. My first semester at college was out of control to say the least. The experiences that I encountered were completely different to what I had used to. I ended up having to take 100 percent control over my life and I didn't have anyone to look after me the way I was used to. Many problems were faced that I never had to face before like where my next meal was coming from. I'm still*

*living and hopefully have not been scared for life, so in the end things didn't work out that badly...*

*The type of student I am is hard to say because I have had two completely different semesters. The first semester was a disaster because I was having too much fun playing tennis and going out at night with my new friends. The more friends I got and the better I played tennis the less attractive class became. I started to miss a lot of class because I was having too much fun doing other things. my second semester was completely different because if I failed this semester I was going to be thrown out of school. I completely turned around and became studious and got rewarded by getting really good grades. Hopefully this semester I can get a compromise between the two semesters.*

*This is my first English class at Cal because I am not very good at it and I kept putting it off because it is supposed to be so hard. Anyway I have not read to many essay since being at Cal for some reason. The easiest essay to write is one where all the facts are outlined and the essay can flow without much thought. The essay I have actually written at Cal have been average for the amount of work I put into them. Hopefully this class can help improve my writing...*

*...Writing this letter was hard and it took a lot of time.*  
*...Jake*

Jake, like many of his classmates, spoke about his newly increased responsibility for his actions and his ambivalent feelings toward this sudden change in his life. Ironically, as I was bemoaning their apparent lack of initiative in the writing class, students were feeling heavily burdened with new responsibilities. Jake's letter seems to me insightful and articulate on this point. These letters put into perspective what in retrospect seems obvious. Reading letters like his early in the semester, I appreciated my students more and panicked less over what had seemed their lack of responsibility.

Jake's first letter, like those of most of my students, is also articulate on the subject of Jake himself as a student. "The more friends I got and the better I played tennis the less attractive class became," he writes. He claims it is hard to assess himself accurately as a student, since he has "had two completely different semesters," each of them representing, by his own account, a different extreme. Jake is coming to know himself as a student. For now he has no certain answer, but he has effectively

posed the question of his identity as a student at UC Berkeley, in itself an act of responsibility.

On the subject of himself as a writer, Jake has more difficulty expressing himself. He dismisses his skills by writing, "I am not very good at it"; his essays are "average." It is not clear from this letter precisely what aspect of writing is difficult for Jake, or even what he means by "the easiest essay to write." Writing for him clearly involves contrary ingredients: large quantities of work and time, but writing, ideally, "flow(s) without much thought." The writing process, for Jake, is a bit of a black box containing the amorphous dimensions of time and work. His writing on the subject of writing is laced with expressions of dread such as, "It is supposed to be so hard"; bafflement, "for some reason"; claims of inexperience, "the essay(s) I have *actually* written"; and half-hearted optimism, "hopefully." Like Jake, other students were only able to discuss themselves as writers in general terms:

*I am not a very strong nor confident writer.*

*As far as my experience with writing is concerned, I feel that I am at an average level compared to my peers.*

*I enjoy writing when I am genuinely interested in my topic ... I feel that my writings are pretty good...*

As I wrote letters back to my students, weaving their voices into my observations, I began to feel more connected both to them and to myself as a teacher. Most all of my letters shared common ingredients:

### 1. Cheerleading

*This is a diverse and exciting group, and I'm looking forward to us getting to know each other better in the weeks to come ... I am delighted by your enthusiasm for discussing ideas, and I can see that we will be learning a great deal from each other.*

### 2. Attention to a common writing problem

*A number of people mentioned (procrastination), so I guess it would be a good idea to devote some time in the next couple of weeks to talking about ways of dealing with it. Nancy says, "Okay, my biggest problem in writing is procrastination." Tom agrees: "Procrastination is the biggest problem for me." If*

*it's any comfort, procrastination seems to be an ordinary human characteristic. ... I think part of the solution involves getting realistic about how much we can do in a given amount of time, and that comes from experience. So, as you work on the first essay please keep track of all the time you spend on it (use the form). This way, we'll be able to discuss ways of dealing with procrastination realistically ...*

### 3. Discussion of other class problems

*Actually, it seems that some of you knew each other before this class began. As Trevor pointed out, this could contribute to the comfortable discussion atmosphere that has already emerged. Please keep in mind — especially if you came into class knowing others — that not everyone has this advantage.*

### 4. Explicit statements about my responsibilities and theirs

*... Trevor would like to "hold [me] accountable for a steady devotion to the discussion of our readings and in-depth views into it" and that sounds good to me! Since there's never enough time to explore the readings as much as I would like to in class, this will work best if you come with annotated texts, especially questions the reading raised for you.*

### 5. Reflection on class activity

*Kea eloquently points out that he "learns best from examples, as opposed to being made one." This seems to me true for most of us. In this course, we will often hear/read a piece written by a member of the class, or dissect a sentence from one of your papers. Although the whole class can benefit from this process, I never want to make anyone's work into a 'bad example.' I hope you can think of examples in this class as opportunities for everyone to try out choices and changes in writing ...*

### The Middle

Students continued to write letters every two weeks reflecting on their writing. By the middle of the semester, many of the students' general, vague comments about writing had changed into specific observations and questions. One batch of letters, in which students wrote about the experience of assembling a mid-term portfolio, included these representative comments:



*I was amazed by the connection I made between my papers. I did not intentionally do that!*

*In my mid semester portfolio introduction, I just criticized myself at first, but after some time, I thought I need to write some good things about my writing. However, I don't know how to.*

*I've realized I tend to start revising before I finish the first draft. What shall I do?*

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***Understanding better the choices  
Jake and his classmates were  
making relieved me of the nagging  
feeling that I was completely  
responsible for my students' learning  
process. The letter writing made  
this understanding possible.***

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These students are making discoveries about their writing processes. The first student is delighted to find, in retrospect, a link between her papers, a process beneath her consciousness working to connect her ideas. Similarly the second student, looking back, realizes that he tends to say only negative things about his writing. He understands now that he would benefit from recognizing some of its positive features. "However," he writes, "I don't know how to." He is making an indirect request for assistance. Knowing now that he needs this direction, I model for him the process of identifying his considerable strengths as a writer. The third student also states a realization about the sequence of writing and revising, and asks the direct question, "What should I do?" — a question I was able to answer. All these students gained new perspective on their writing. In two of the cases, they asked questions that pushed forward their writing skills and self-awareness.

On the other hand, Jake's letter from this same week does not show a similar level of reflection:

*Dear Margaret,*

*Well, alot has been happening since my last letter, and that is to say the least. Tennis has been unbelievably hectic. We have played five matches in the last*

*week and a half. Straight after class last Thursday we left for the airport in the bus ... Today, we played the University of Utah at Hellman tennis courts. But that is not the end of our tennis endeavors because straight after class we are leaving for the airport. Actually the team already left on the eight o'clock flight this morning and I am making my own way down to Arizona, straight after class.*

*I also want to ask you for an extension, for handing in my revision outline for my essay. I was going to do that on Monday afternoon but, my girlfriend had a car accident and, I spent five hours at the emergency room with her. So if it is possible maybe I can hand that in with my revised version of my essay...*

*Anyway, my term paper is coming along very slowly as I have had little time to work on it in the last week and a half. But in saying that, I spent three hours at the library yesterday doing research and I think it is getting on track now.*

*Jake*

Here the only detail about his writing process is the number of hours he recently spent in the library. However, his focus on his tennis matches is a way of demonstrating to me that he is taking seriously his class responsibilities. Although his teammates have already left for Arizona, he has postponed his departure until after class, and he takes pains to inform me of this point. He also wants me to know that he is assuming 'adult,' non-academic responsibilities like accompanying his injured girlfriend to the hospital. In this transition to the world of adult responsibilities, we see Jake weighing his obligations and making choices about his priorities. Understanding better the choices Jake and his classmates were making relieved me of the nagging feeling that I was completely responsible for my students' learning process. The letter writing made this understanding possible.

### **The End**

By the end of the semester, the student letters contained many insights into the process of writing. The following excerpt from one letter was written by the same student who, a month earlier, had written, "I was amazed by the connection I made between my papers. I did not intentionally do that!" Her writing had, in fact, become more intentional; here she expresses her new feeling of control over the process:

*I am amazed about how much my writing has improved. I have so much more direction when I go to write an essay. I realized this when I edited my term paper right after I had written it for the first time. I learned how to revise and edit in this class. I was moving paragraphs around, rewording sentences, taking out sentences that weren't clear and adding sentences that related to my thesis. I hope that eventually, I will see these mistakes as I am making them. I know that revising is the best way to improve your writing, but if I can start with an improved version, then it can only get better.*

This student still writes with little variation in sentence structure. Furthermore, her view of her preliminary lack of clarity as "mistakes" troubles me; I would prefer that she accept them as part of the process, not as something she is doing wrong. But I agree with her conclusion as I understand it: If one has limited time for revising (as most of us do), then the "better" the first draft is, the better the final version may be.

It could be argued that this student might have made these gains without writing letters to me every two weeks about her writing process. However, I believe that the demand to articulate the writing process encouraged her explicit discoveries about writing. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, this student, by observing and writing about her own writing processes, has assumed some of the responsibility for her education. This has likely happened because I required her to write me a letter every two weeks. Of course, I am not advocating the abdication of teacherly authority, rather a sharing of the responsibility for education.

Of course, even at the end of the semester I was still reading about the sister who had a baby in Australia, the jubilation over the arrival of spring, the doomed love affair and so on. I enjoyed these human, intimate revelations, and shared some of my own in my responses to the class. But typically their letters now began with some social, chatty news, and then moved through a topic transition that was often explicitly marked: "But let's talk about English," or "Now down to business." More and more frequently, the text that followed such a transition was an insightful commentary on the student's own learning process. Perhaps this is evidence that the letters are serving more than one purpose, interweaving academic and social functions. Jake's final letter nicely illustrates both of these functions:

*Dear Margaret,*

*Well, well, well. We have come to the end of the road....As I looked through my essays the last half hour, I see the improvement that I have achieved through rewriting them. This is a practice that I never used to do when writing my previous papers, which were not the greatest literary work....*

*The third essay I wrote was titled "Famous Native American Speeches," which I thought was very appropriately named. This was an extremely hard essay to write because as you know I have a problem with summarizing things instead of analyzing them. It was a great learning experience because I was really not familiar with the concept of analyzing and this helped me see the difference....*

*The best thing about doing the research paper was that the library god was looking over me. I had a great experience with one of the librarians, who went out of her way to send me information about my chosen topic [gambling]. Gambling has always held my interest as long as I am not losing my money, and as I was in the library, this was not a high possibility....*

*I would just like to thank the "Green Pen Monster" [a reference to my green ink on his papers] for all your help throughout the semester. . .*

*Yours sincerely,  
Jake*

Jake here acknowledges his significant progress in revising, reflecting, titling, and learning the difference between summary and analysis. He does so in a letter that sustains his unique voice and sense of humor, and in a tone that is personal and conversational. Compare this thoughtful and detailed letter with Jake's vague and uneasy discussion of the writing process early in the semester. Reading letters like this at the end of the semester, I am convinced that our work towards a balancing of responsibility for learning had been worthwhile. Let us hope that this new perspective can be carried to other semesters, other courses, other life experiences.

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# Teaching Can Be a Novel Experience

by

BOB TIERNEY



Good teaching is like good writing. I feel qualified to say this because, while I have been employed as a biology teacher for over three decades, I have also struggled with two novels "in progress," as the euphemism goes. In the process, I have become convinced that many of the axioms guiding a writer's effort are the same principles that direct the craft of a successful teacher. Consider the following precepts advocated by those who write books on how to write — books that most writers don't read because they are too busy writing.

## Know Your Audience

The number one reason most writers get rejection slips is failure to address the piece to a specific audience. Successful writers, before pounding out a manuscript for a periodical, read several issues of the magazine. They scan the letters to the editor, look at the advertisers, and read the classified ads in the back. Until they can "see" a picture of the person who reads the magazine, they are not ready to write the piece.

Teachers, like writers, need to know their audience — something teachers, with 150 or more students each day, find difficult to do. Most do not know the students until after the first test when they have already lost those who happened to get a low score. The wise teacher makes the effort to know the audience from day one. In my first years of teaching, I was too anxious to hand out the books and get going. After all I taught biology, the study of life, and I only had one

year. We had no time to waste. However, over time I have learned to devote the whole first week, maybe a few days more, to knowing my audience and establishing some trust. Sure, after one week I was eight weeks behind the district curriculum guide, but no matter, I would catch up later. During these early days in the semester, I would ask students to write on subjects that might, to them, seem to have little to do with science — their names, their typical day, their heroes and villains, and their predictions of where they might be in the year 2020. I would come to know those kids as individuals, not merely as members of the class.

I've used other writing activities to help students get comfortable in the classroom and less anxious about the subject of science in much the same way an author's preface prepares a reader to plunge into a book. They make a sketch map of the room. They select an object in the room to describe and explain how they feel about the object. They tell of any rumors they have heard about the room, me, or the course. For example, one year there was a rumor I had a self-polishing car. I had told the previous year's class that I never washed my VW van. One day they saw it all sparkling clean in the parking lot. They reminded me I never washed my car and wanted to know why it was so clean that day. I told them it must be because it is self-polishing, pointing out how far advanced German engineering is. To my amazement the story of the self-polishing van became part of the mythology of Irvington High.

As they tell their stories, I write with them, sharing rumors I have heard about them like, "You guys won't dissect frogs unless you can listen to rap music at the same time." I ask them to explain what they hope to get out of the course. I explain what I expect of them.

Sometimes I have the students pair up, each of them choosing a side to the question: Why study science? If I taught auto shop it would be, why take auto shop? One student takes the position that science is a waste of time. The other takes the position that science is the most valuable subject in school. They argue, in writing, silently passing their papers back and forth. After about ten minutes each student shares a "golden line," the line her opponent thinks is the best one. I use these as a basis for a class discussion. Even a minimal effort can lead to lively debate. For example, one of my students wrote, "Science sucks." His opponent chose this as the best line. In this case I was able to get a discussion going on whether science actually sucked; I was able to convince them that technically it could not. We had a great time. These students, like readers beginning a book, need to anticipate the benefits of the experience before them.

### Hook the Reader

"Hook your reader," an article in *Writer's Digest* preaches. It's good advice. Good writers grab the reader's attention right away. A writer, we are told, needs to capture the attention of a busy editor in the first two paragraphs or the rejection slip will surely be in the mail.

If students are going to stay with you through a unit of learning, they need to be "hooked," involved. Ideally, they will be as eager to find out what happens next as any reader of a Dick Francis novel. As a biology teacher I never lacked for hooks. I could bring in anything that wiggles, bites, or makes a noise, and the kids were ready to plunge in. But what about the history teacher?

A history teacher I know hooks his students into a unit on the westward movement by showing the class a picture of some pioneers posing in front of their covered wagon. He asks each student to become one of the pioneers in the picture. What do they smell, hear, feel, touch, and see? Students write diary entries for the character they have assumed. The activity generates a whole blackboard full of questions: How far could they go in one day? Were the wagons pulled by oxen or horses? How did they cross the desert without any cokes? His students now own the unit; they are hooked.

### Build Trust

Louis L'Amour, the famous writer of western novels, built his reputation on accuracy and authentic details, assuring the reader his tale could be trusted. I live in a gold mining area and know a little about panning for gold. The following passage from his novel, *Dutchman's Flat*, convinced me he knew what he was talking about:

*With a quick glance to make sure there were no Apaches in sight, he tipped the pan slightly, to an angle of about thirty degrees so the lighter sands, already buoyed up by the water, could slip out over the side. He struck the pan several good blows to help settle the gold, if any, and then dipped for more water and continued the process.*

I remember picking up "an airplane book," a book to read on the airplane and not worth carrying off the airplane. The British author opened by describing an American army major in a parachute battalion during World War II. Having myself been an American in an army parachute battalion just after the war, I realized after skimming the first paragraph that the author didn't know what he was talking about. His major was black and was carrying the wrong weapon. The Pentagon, stupidly, did not integrate the army until 1948. Although black units were often commanded by white officers, black officers were never put in command of white units. The author had not done his homework. The book never made it to the airplane. Write from your own experience, do your homework; it's a good rule for both writers and teachers to follow.

The teacher must assure the students from the first day of class that he knows his stuff and can be trusted to treat them fairly and with respect. In my class I would build some trust and respect by writing my autobiography as a scientist as students wrote their own science autobiographies. While they told stories of how their eighth grade science teacher was carrying an aquarium across the room and the bottom dropped out, I recounted my own ups and downs as a student of science. I told them that as a biology student at Oakland Tech High School I never did see anything under the microscope that Miss Hawk said we should see. I just copied whatever Marsha drew. I ended the piece by concluding, "I am now certain Marsha never saw anything either." The science autobiography assignment gave me a sense of what my students had studied in science and, more importantly, how they



felt about the subject. Further, by writing my own science autobiography, I could convince the students that I knew something about biology and that I empathized with their role as science students.



### Show, Don't Tell

Good writers do not write lines like, "We walked on the beach in the winter." They take the reader with them. Robert MacNeil, describing his boyhood, writes:

*We enjoyed the beaches as often on gray, cloudy days with a fresh wind blowing as on days when the sand reflected a dazzling sun with no wind. More typically, there was wind and a strong lungful of breath-taking freshness tasting of iodine and seaweed clean enough to eat. (1989)*

Reading these words, I am placed on the wet sand of Dillon Beach where I spent several summers. My nostrils are filled with the odor of uprooted kelp

rolling on the berm in rhythm with the incoming waves. MacNeil's "showing" writing provoked these sensations even though I am a hundred miles from a beach. Good teachers also show rather than tell. A former student, now in her forties, recently told me the most impressive memory she took from my biology class was the spider dance. The dance came about one day when, on the spur of the moment, I decided to show, not tell, the class the mating dance of the male tarantula. Pasting eight masking tape eyes to my bald head I proceeded to do the dance as accurately as I could with only half the number of needed appendages. The students roared with laughter, but they never forgot the plight of the pitiful male tarantula who eventually gets devoured by his mate. The spider dance became a yearly command performance.

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### *Good teachers also show rather than tell.*

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Of course, showing and not telling can be overdone. I remember a football coach I worked with getting exasperated with the feeble attempts of the team to block a punt in practice. He decided to show them how it was done. He blocked the punt, but while the bruises from the belly flop he took impressed many of the players, the price, he belatedly recognized, was too high.

### Be Kind to Your Reader

John Trimble (1975) urges writers to be kind to their readers: Write with clarity. Don't show off your vocabulary; don't talk over the head of the reader, but don't talk down either, Trimble says.

I have caught myself showing off with a stimulating biological discourse filled with terms and concepts like volvocales, coenobium, and siphonous forms. Some students sit there, eyes glazed. A few scribble feverishly, without understanding, in their notebooks. Many have a, "May I go see my counselor now?" look on their faces. The students are intimidated, put off by my self-perceived brilliance. But I also have erred in the other direction, insulting a class of "reluctant learn-



ers" by giving them a lesson about fossils which included their having to cut out paper forms to assemble a dinosaur. I got the idea from *Learning* magazine. It was designed for third graders. It took months to regain their trust. Be kind to the student; respect the student as a good writer respects his reader.

### Revise, Revise, Revise

Ernest Hemingway said he wrote the last page of *A Farewell to Arms* 39 times because he couldn't seem to get the words right. I know as soon as I drop this piece in the mailbox I will wish I had at least one more chance to revise it. Good teachers, like good writers, constantly revise their lessons. Bad teachers teach the same lesson thousands of times.

The curriculum guide for my "reluctant learners" required I teach a unit on how to read a map. The first year we opened our books, read the chapter, did some map drills and answered some questions in the back of the chapter. This, of course, was followed by a test which most of them flunked. My lesson definitely needed revision.

The next year I started the unit by bringing in topographical maps of our local area, some overlay paper, compasses, string, and rulers. I formed students into groups and told them we were going to build a road. Each group represented a construction company attempting to get a contract from the state. The idea was to build a road from point A on the map to point B. I gave them a cost sheet which included the cost of digging a tunnel, moving a house, paving each mile, labor costs, etc. I made up the figures. The group that submitted a sealed bid to build the best road for the least cost won the contract. Of course, before they could start building the road they had to submit an environmental impact study and a complete written description of the route they proposed to take.

It took three weeks, but it was three weeks of student groups hovering over their maps, using their compasses, learning about contour lines, map symbols, calculating expenses, and writing reports as they traced the route they were sure would win the contract. We finished the unit with the principal opening the sealed bids and announcing the winner. The winning group got Payday candy bars. That class did much better on the test than the previous class. If I had to revise that lesson again, I would bring in somebody from the State Transportation Department to give them a talk.

### Know Your Craft

Becoming a good writer takes lots of practice. Good writers learn from other writers; most writers I know are avid readers. Jack London sat in his room copying the works of authors he considered to be the masters until he had a sense of the rhythm, the voice, and a feel for the words used by the great ones. The best teachers of writing are those who are themselves writers. All teachers should be aware that their use of the language — the syntax, the grammar, even the handwriting they place on the board — represents a model for the student.

Forty years ago student teaching was called practice teaching. It bothered me. Did it mean when we finally got hired we didn't need to practice anymore? The craft of teaching, like writing, is an art that can never be truly mastered. Teaching the perfect lesson is as unattainable as finding the bottom of a black hole, but the striving for it can be an exhilarating lifetime challenge. Good teachers never stop growing with the profession. They attend, not necessarily enjoy, workshops. They are researchers in their own classrooms; they share what they have learned with colleagues. Like good writers they burn up — not out.

For many years now I have used my understanding of the link between teaching and writing to enrich my professional life. I expect I will soon read another good novel and, in the process, learn something about teaching. And as I am reflecting on my teaching, I may decide to give one of those "in-progress" novels one more try.

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- Bob Tierney, a teacher consultant with the Bay Area Writing Project, now lives in Poker Bar, CA, and is currently writing a book about fly-fishing.

22

# Audience

by

BENITA LITTLE



*Benita Little is a fellow with the  
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A child searches for something  
In that messy thing he calls a bookbag,  
A worried expression on his face.  
One brief moment of panic  
And suddenly his eyes light up  
Like jewels in a morning  
That 'til now has had no sparkle.  
Beneath crumpled papers and a potato chip bag  
He spies the object of his desperate search.  
Triumphantly he marches to my desk.  
"A pome," he says.  
"I wrote it for you."  
As I read the poem my eyes fill with tears.  
"Is it true precious?" I ask.  
"Did this really happen to you?"  
"Of course not," he answers  
As he bounces back to his desk.  
"I just thought you liked sad pomes."

# Writing History:

## Before and After Portfolios

by

STAN PESICK



### Before

**Text Question:** Despite laws passed during Reconstruction, southern African Americans lost civil rights and did not regain them until the 1960s. Explain why.

**Typical Answer:** The reason that African Americans lost their civil rights and did not regain them until the 1960s was because of how Gerrymandering stopped them and it also had to do with what happened when the Ku Klux Klan terrorized them after the Union troops did not protect them and also the poll tax helped.

### After

#### Portfolio Response:

*(This week) we studied the "Era of Reconstruction," of the U.S. At the end of the Civil War, most African Americans expected their lives to improve radically. The following is a quote about how a former slave recalled the excitement she and other slaves felt when they learned of the Union victory and their new freedom. I selected this quote and wrote about it because it holds a particular meaning and interest for me.*

*"We weren't there in Texas long when the soldiers marched in to tell us that we were free ... I remem-*

*ber one woman. She jumped on a barrel and she shouted. She jumped off and she shouted. She jumped back on again and she shouted some more. She kept that up for a long time, just jumping on a barrel and back off again."*

*— Anna Woods, from a Federal Writer's Project interview, 1930s*

*It made me smile when I mentally pictured how this African American woman (and maybe many others like her) reacted to their freedom. However my smile didn't last long because I realized that the word "freedom" that was given to slaves didn't agree with the way I had personally defined it. I wouldn't say freed slaves received their freedom after the war because they were still being chained up by laws that prevented them from having the same "rights, privileges, and immunities" as were enjoyed by white men. To me, slave's freedom was like letting your pet bird go free with a rock tied to his legs.*

*May*

During my first years of teaching U.S. History, there were too many times that I returned papers to students only to have them glance at their grade and then toss them in the trash can as they left the room. Much of the student writing I was reading during these

years looked nothing like May's. Rather — as the first example above illustrates — it was, at best, the textbook or encyclopedia rearranged and paraphrased in not always grammatical sentences and, at worst, these and other books copied word for word. Many students probably had little idea about what they had written and forgot it the minute it was out of sight. That I had to read and comment on this writing made this situation even worse. What could I say? I have no doubt that many students worked hard on their assignments, but in the end, they really didn't care about the words they were writing down. Some students even asked me, as they prepared to write, "Do you want this in my own words?" It was a very frustrating situation for both teacher and students. The student writing was not at all like the historical writing that I enjoyed and hoped, as a teacher, my students would learn to appreciate and create.

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***"Each age writes the history of the past anew with reference to the condition uppermost in its time."***

**— Frederick J. Turner**

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These were discouraging moments, but they started me thinking about the possibility of developing lessons and activities which might move students to write pieces that they would want to keep and even read again with appreciation and insight. I began taking steps toward what was to become the "history portfolio" project.

An article published in American Heritage magazine (December, 1984) influenced me as I moved along this path. The magazine had asked a number of working historians to write about the one event in American history they would like to have witnessed. At what event would they have wanted to be a "fly on a wall"? The responses included in the article were engaging, moving, thoughtful, and personal. The passage below provides an example.

*Emancipation*

*The incident that I would have witnessed is that described in Thomas Wentworth Higginson's Army Life in a Black Regiment. He writes of a ceremony in South Carolina on January 1, 1863, celebrating the coming into effect of the Emancipation Proclamation.*

*The ceremony was conventional and simple until Higginson got up to speak and waved the American flag before the audience of black soldiers, white civilians and officers, and a large number of slaves, who at the moment were legally receiving their freedom for the first time. As the flag was being waved, Higginson tells us, "there arose ... a strong male voice (but rather cracked and elderly), into which two women's voices instantly blended, singing as if by an impulse that could no more be repressed than the morning note of the song sparrow, 'My Country, 'tis of thee, Sweet land of Liberty, of thee I sing!'"*

*The ceremony ended as the former slaves sang on, irrepressibly, through verse and verse. Higginson motioned the few whites who began to join in to be silent. The moment, as he said, was electric. "Nothing could be more wonderfully unconscious; art could not have dreamt of a tribute to the day of jubilee that should be so affecting; history will not believe it...." This incident epitomizes the most profound moment in America's social history: that point when millions ceased to be slaves in the home of the free and set in motion the historic challenge that white America make real its own vision.*

*— Carl N. Degler, historian*

This passage illustrates many important elements of historical thinking and writing: narrative and description, analysis and interpretation. The question itself — "tell us about one event in American history you would like to have witnessed" — directs the writer to be selective and to have a point of view. This focus on selection calls to mind historian Mauricio Tennero's distinction between "history" and "the past." The past, he says, is everything that has happened. It is impersonal, existing outside of our personal consciousness or experience. On the other hand, history is shaped when students or historians look at the past and consciously choose to study or discuss events, individuals, and groups they believe to be significant. The famous historian Frederick J. Turner put it this way: "Each age writes the history of the past anew with reference to the condition uppermost in its time..." If we follow this line of thinking, one conclusion might be that when historians choose to study, analyze, and explain parts of the past, their choices reflect a personal interest or connection. This is exactly the opposite of what seemed to motivate the student writing I was reading in my history classes.

### Selecting from the Past

*History is ... the record of what one age finds worthy of note in another.*

— Jacob Burkhart, Swiss historian

I wanted my students to learn to select from the past, to build personal connections to history. I reasoned that they would be able to do this if I allowed them more choice. I began to encourage — actually require — students to think about their readings, mostly from the textbook, write about what they found interesting and significant, and jot down questions about what troubled and confused them. In one assignment, they chose an illustration (a painting, photo, cartoon), described what they saw, explained why it was used in the reading and why it interested them. These departures from “traditional” history teaching were, I believed, a first step towards helping students begin to think historically.

I can clarify what I mean when I speak of “thinking historically” by referring to a framework offered by Peter Seixas at the University of British Columbia. Seixas identifies three basic elements of historical thinking. The first is a student’s ability to identify events of historical significance, and in this process establish criteria for significance. The second element connects to a student’s ability to rethink or refine an historical view as new information is learned. The third element refers to a student’s understanding that choices and decisions were made by historical figures in time periods different than their own. Connected to this latter understanding is the idea that in order for students to make sense of history, they also need to make moral judgments about the events and individuals they are studying. Viewed in this frame-

work, historical thinking becomes a process of discovery and clarification.

### Compiling a Portfolio

Although I was finding ways to encourage historical thinking, I had not found a satisfactory way to assess what was actually occurring in my classes. Then I learned about portfolios, a device my colleagues in other disciplines were using to encourage students to think for themselves and to reflect on their work. Simply put, a portfolio consists of selections of student work which the student has chosen and evaluated as his or her “best” work.

During the first semester of 1993-94 school year, my U.S. history students collected all of their writing in a folder kept in the classroom. Thus, the papers in the folder were, for each student, a record of what he or she had thought and written about U.S. History over



This picture interest me because it shows every aspect for the Westward movement. The endless desire to move conquering all in their way. The indians looked on at the destruction of their way of life which they could even stem much less stop. The indians not surprisingly are only a small part of this picture, while the land and the train took up a great part of the painting.



this time period. This was important because a collection of writing allows a writer to reflect on his or her ideas and consider their evolution. It allows students to see what they knew and compare it to what they now know. In this context the student writing in my history class became primary source documents, providing each student with a record of his or her thinking which could be revisited and analyzed. This is the idea which drew me to portfolios as a potential assessment tool.

I assigned the history portfolio in lieu of a more traditional final exam. The contents of each student's portfolio would consist of selections from previous assignments that semester (see box) and a letter to the principal that commented on the selections and responded to a series of quotes from historians, offering a framework for discussing history and the work of historians.

#### Portfolio Assignment Part I

Select from all the writing you have done this semester...

1. a thoughtful reaction to an individual or event which caught your attention, explaining why you would like to study this subject further.
2. one quote which you selected and wrote about which holds particular meaning and interest for you. Include the quote and your comments.
3. your best piece of writing on a particular picture or painting
4. your choice of a piece of your writing on an issue which best illustrates your work as an historian as it is described in one of the quotes on the front page.

I want to discuss the portfolios of four students who wrote in the spirit of the assignment. They were willing to try to make sense of the material they were studying through selection of important individuals and events, interpretation, personal judgments, and reflections on the nature of studying and writing history. These were, by no means, the only students who did this; rather, they are representative of those

students who made an honest effort to reflect on their study. Brian, May, Mandy, and Clarence used the opportunity to revisit their work to tentatively explore philosophies of history, to develop historical themes, and to try and use history to understand their own experiences.

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***"I admired the courage and spirit of Ida B. Wells when she didn't get out of her chair which she was told to by a white man. My reactions were 'you go girl!'"***

**— Mandy**

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#### Reacting to History

One part of each portfolio assignment asked students to choose a thoughtful reaction they had written about an individual or event which had caught their attention. In doing this, they moved beyond mere interest and established, at least by implication, the criteria for significance that Seixas sees as part of historical thinking. Below are the pieces that were included in the four portfolios.

#### Brian Keeps His Distance

*"The Battle of Bull Run" or "The Battle of Manassas" depending which part of the country you were in. Both the Union and Confederates were expecting a short war lasting a few months with one big battle to decide the winner. There were some people like General Sherman who knew the war wouldn't last a few months, but a few years. The public ignored him. On July 21, 1861 the two armies met at Manassas, the Union army was called the army of the Potomac and the Confederate army was called the army of Northern Virginia. The north was so confident of victory, that on lookers from Washington D.C. came to see the battle. The confederates were outnumbered 2 to 1, but managed to hold on till reinforcements arrived, then counter attacked, confusing the union army, and winning the first battle of the war. This victory also boosted the South's moral knowing they could defeat the North in battle. By now both sides knew it would be a long war.*

Of the four writers, Brian is the most detached and analytical. Brian's choice of the Battle of Bull Run is based on his understanding that, as a result of this battle, "both sides knew it would be a long war." Because Brian is a Civil War buff, he applies the criteria many other students of military history apply: The outcome of a significant battle affects the course and the outcome of a war, and (although Brian doesn't say so) the outcome of a war affects the direction of history.

### **Mandy Discovers a Hero**

*Ida B. Wells: I admired the courage and spirit of Ida B. Wells when she didn't get out of her chair which she was told to by a white man. My reactions were "you go girl!" I had to say that because there's hardly any 4 1/2 feet tall female could stand up for herself back in those days. Even today in America many foreigners give up their dreams and live under people's shoes. Wells was little but she became one of the famous leaders against lynching and stop the murdering of blacks by whites. The years gone by, she became a full time writer and expressed the bitter feelings inside of her about racism. She fought many ways to lead African Americans to a better condition of life.*

Seixas identifies as a characteristic of historical thinking a combination of empathy and moral judgment, plus an understanding of the ways that people in the past made choices and came to decisions in times that were quite different than our own. Mandy's admiring comment on Ida B. Wells illustrates her effort to understand times quite different than her own. "My reactions were 'you go girl!' I had to say that because there's hardly any 4 1/2 feet tall female could stand up for herself in those days."

### **Clarence Thinks Twice**

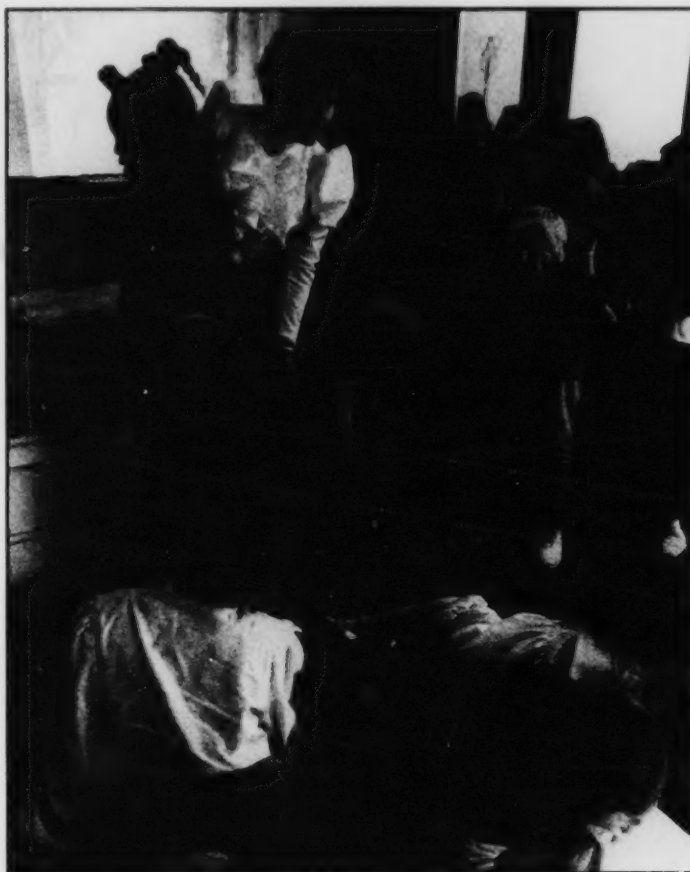
Clarence has little, in his original reaction, to say about the event he chose, The Louisiana Purchase. But after learning about other examples of the "harsh" treatment that other groups received, he returns and elaborates on it, arguing that it both represented and helped set the stage for other mistreatment.

### **Original Reaction:**

*The Louisiana Purchase was essential to United States history. It extended the land of the American territory, although I believe the colonists would have moved westward without it.*

### **Revised Version:**

*Although the Louisiana Purchase extended the land of early America, it was done at the expense of the Indians. In purchasing the territory no one thought with regard to the Native Americans who could have cared less what America did. This was also done with*



*regard to the African people, they were also transported from their homelands where they peacefully resided. Truthfully I do not blame the Indians for retaliating with violence, I certainly would if my home and family were being threatened.*

*The Americans were not finished at telling them to get off the land, (which rightfully wasn't theirs to begin with) while transporting them to other places they kept the Indians in concentration camps where*

hundreds of thousands died. Although we have not reached this point in history, Americans also put Japanese people in concentration camps during World War I. [at this point we had not yet studied Japanese relocation; it's not clear this was simply a typo or an actual error in factual knowledge] they also passed laws keeping Chinese out of this country. This relentless persecution of other cultures only proves the harsh nature many Americans used to possess.

**Future Study:** *In the future I would like to study more about how the Indians reacted to their new settings and future placement on reservations.*

For Clarence, the Louisiana purchase is significant because it set in motion a chain of events which resulted in mistreatment of the Native Americans.

#### **May Links Then and Now**

*After reading the section, "The Cherokee Solution," I was not only outraged but also disgusted by the unthoughtful ways Southern whites treated the Cherokee because they were hungry to obtain Cherokee land to grow cotton. It was bad enough that settlers took away land that didn't belong to them but they went a little further by pushing off the Cherokees into the desert. The settlers themselves came to the colonies in search of a new life and to experience the feelings of striking it rich by owning farms and so on. They all shared experiences of sufferings of wanting the opportunity to be able to cross the ocean so they could have what they were deprived of in their own land. Then, from these experiences, they should be able to stop and compare what they had gone through and what they were doing with the Indians: they settled in a new land because they were deprived of what they wanted and in doing so, the Native Americans were deprived of what they have. I feel that situations are somewhat the same. If settlers had thought of that, maybe they would take smaller and easier steps in their westward expansion.*

*The situation faced by the Cherokee caught my attention and I would like to do further study of the tribe because I am very eager to learn what became of them after their removal. Being an immigrant from Vietnam, I experienced the hardship of my trial of tears when my family and I and thousands of my people left our country because of*

*communism. We found a better life in the United States after we left our mother land. But what about the Cherokee, did they find a better life after they left theirs? And what happened to them today? This is what I would like to learn.*

For May the underlying reason for selecting the Cherokee removal is her sense that it allows her to better understand her own experiences. May had experienced her own "trail of tears" when her family fled the Vietnamese communists. May is one of those historians looking toward the past for answers to explain her present situation.

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***May experienced her own "trail of tears" when her family fled the Vietnamese communists. May is ... looking toward the past for answers to explain her present situation.***

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Readers will note that each piece has a different focus, both in its content and its historical significance. A richness emerges which brings different information and a different perspective to class discussions that would be harder to create if all the students were responding to the same text or teacher-created questions.

Throughout the semester students seemed attracted to situations about which they could make moral judgments and express empathy with those who have been wronged. May chides European settlers who came to America for opportunity for depriving the Native Americans of their opportunities.

When, in another context, Mandy writes of Reconstruction she says,

*"During this particular period blacks became freedmen, and I feel happy for them. Then the minute we are not paying attention, the laws which supported them failed. I think its heartbreaking because the laws could provide rights but couldn't stop discrimination..."*

However, as outraged as students are by mistreatment, they do not seem able to bring to their thinking

the other half of Seixas' empathy equation: an understanding that people in the past make choices ... in times quite different from our own. Even so, by making judgments about the stories, they may have come to a better understanding of their own moral standards and how these standards might be applied to and have been formed by history.

### Thinking about Historical Thinking

Another element of historical thinking, according to Seixas, concerns the question, "How do students know what they know about the past and how has that knowledge been shaped?" To help students think about this question, I asked them to write a letter to the principal reflecting on the choices they had made for their portfolios, and in this process they began to think about how their ideas had been shaped.

Below are excerpts from the four different letters students wrote to our principal in which they take a stab at this question, "How do I know what I know?" We start again with Brian, the only one of the students who might be seen as a history buff.

*My name is Brian and I'm a student in Mr. Pesick's fifth period U.S. History class.*

*History has always been my favorite subject. This may sound weird, but I enjoy learning and reading about history...*

*I have selected three pieces from the Civil War period because out of all the time periods I have studied, I enjoyed learning about this the most. Imagine yourself in this time period. The nation is still pretty young and its having its first major internal conflict. This was the slave issue. The states were divided and a person had to choose who to be loyal to, his or her state or his or her nation.*

*I've been thinking. I can't think of any country in the world that didn't have a civil war. I guess having a civil war is one of the things a country must go through. I think it's a test to see if the country was strong enough to survive...*

What is impressive here is that Brian refines and revises his view of history to the point that he is able to construct a theory about the role a civil war might play in a nation's history: "I guess having a civil war is a one of the things a country must go through. I think it's a test to see if the country was strong enough to survive." Obviously, Brian's knowledge of the Civil War is shaped by a knowledge of history that goes beyond what he has learned in my class.



In contrast to Brian, Mandy's connection to history is more personal:

*I've been in Skyline for almost two years ... My native culture is back in China, but because I am Chinese [this fact has had] ... a great impact on my point of view.*

*... History, I believe is worth studying because somehow in the semester I've learned how to live in the present by knowing the past. I never hate what other people do to me because forgiving is a way to free myself. I've picked the Ku Klux Klan. I figured that blacks might be*

*a little painful studying this particular subject ...*

*As a student historian my biggest concern about war is the soldier. They fought and died. I cherish their distribution of blood. They are like a secure wall protecting us from terrors. They build our kingdom.*

*The issue I picked expressed my own religious cultures. Chinese had tough times in the past, but I think we're thankful too because America led us to great wealth and settle in the Gold Mountains.*



*I don't consider myself an historian. My point of views are to hold my own interests and not follow other people's footsteps.*

Mandy's statement that one can learn to live in the present by studying the past is an intriguing and powerful comment. As a relatively recent immigrant to the U.S, she does use the history she has learned to help her redefine her view of the present. I can only speculate on what Mandy was thinking, but there are clues: Her comments on Reconstruction at the beginning of this article and the sentences of her letter in which she talks about not hating people for what they do to her exhibit a sensitivity to the feelings of black students as we studied slavery. This sensitivity stands in contrast to the racial tension that sometimes divides students at our school, a tension that is often apparent between the African-American students and the recent immigrants from Asia. Mandy's comment suggests that her added knowledge of history has made the present a more complex place but, at the same time, a more understandable one as she refined her thinking in order to make sense of her experiences.

Unlike Mandy's tentative and elliptical discussion of what she learned, May's analysis is in no way hesitant.

*...To be truthful, I used to hate history. I could never understand what I have read because well, it's boring, and I detested answering questions in the back of each chapter ... The questions that I (now) have to answer are not facts but rather ... my personal opinions on what I've read ... I am able to be creative and say what I want to say because the answer is not going to be A, B, C, or D.*

*Having the freedom to be creative and say what I believe, the work that I put in my portfolio reflect what I think are to be important. Being an immigrant from a war torn country called Vietnam also reflects much of my writing in this portfolio ... As you will see, my reactions to historical events usually deals with freedom. I find freedom important in the past because it effects the present. The following work illustrates who I am ... After all, history is... the record of what one age finds worthy of note in another. (Jacob Burkhart)*

May

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***Mandy's comment suggests that her added knowledge of history has made the present a more complex place but, at the same time, a more understandable one...***

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After looking back over her work and choosing selections for her portfolio, May notes that much of her interests relate to her experiences as an immigrant from a "war torn country called Vietnam." She makes this point because she has developed a concern with freedom, both as an historical issue and current concern. It becomes for her an important enough insight to be connected to the quote from the historian Jacob Burkhart, "history is ... the record of what one age finds worthy of note in another." In her reading of American history, May has focused on the theme of freedom, as she asks her readers to consider how its ebb and flow have impacted peoples lives.

May's comment can best be understood in the context of our class activity. I had asked students to respond in writing to the question, "What is the meaning of freedom?" We discussed their ideas as we read letters from ex-slaves discussing what freedom meant to them. We read other historical accounts of how individuals and groups tried to make freedom a reality, and we studied ways efforts to achieve freedom had been resisted. All along the students were asked to revisit their initial definition and refine it based on what they were learning. It was in this context that May produced the writing that begins this article: "However, my smile didn't last long because I realized that the word 'freedom' that was given to slaves didn't agree with the way I had personally defined it." Of the four students Clarence had the most outward struggle trying to refine his philosophy of history:

*...The quote I believe most illustrates my, and most others work, is number four, "History is ... the record of what one age finds worthy in another." I only write about things that are relevant today. An example of this is the issue of racial diversity. It is a hot topic in today's society and have consequently altered our morals to include acceptance of other cultures. The quote I most disagree with is number two, "Historians ought to be precise, truthful, and quite*



*unprejudiced and neither interest nor fear, hatred nor affection, should cause them to swerve from the path of truth, whose mother is history." Each historian uses his or her own ideals in presenting history or else we wouldn't have so many different versions of history. Historians only write on what interests them, some write on racial issues and some on political issues. This is what makes history special, the different and complex versions allow each student to decide what is true to them on the basis of their morals.*

Clarence

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***In his view, "each historian uses his or her own ideals in presenting history or else we wouldn't have so many different versions of history."***

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Connecting his view to Burkhart's, Clarence writes, "I only write about things that are relevant today." From his perspective these are issues connected to racial and cultural diversity. In this context he explicitly challenges the notion that historians can be truthful, precise, and unprejudiced. In his view "each historian uses his or her own ideals in presenting history or else we wouldn't have so many different versions of history." Following this line of thought leads Clarence to a very relativistic sense of historic truth: "...the different and complex versions allow each student to decide for themselves what is true to them based on their morals." Clarence hints at that selectivity that comes in to play as people weigh the validity of different historical accounts and choose which stories and evidence to discuss. Are different historical perspectives competing truths or different interpretations of the same event? Clarence struggles with this question as he attempts to explain and justify his own historical point of view.

The quotes from established historians are part of these reflections because I specifically asked students to reflect on how they viewed their work within the context of philosophies of history and the work of historians. The quotes represented some very complex ideas. We discussed them in great detail, but we had not discussed how they might be connected to the students' work. In this regard they were on their own.

Their selections, though, reflect how they struggled to come to terms with these concepts as they very tentatively attempted to enter into a historical discussion over purpose and perspective. In May's and Mandy's letters they argue for the idea that what historians choose to study reflects what their own time period finds worthy of note in the past. For both of these recent immigrants, what is worthy of note are questions of freedom and issues connected to cultural encounters. Brian, who has taken on a very authoritative voice, identifies in a part of his letter not quoted here with the statement from Cervantes, "Historians ought to be precise, truthful, and quite unprejudiced..."

### **Remaining Questions**

This "history portfolio" project was designed to promote student thinking and learning through written reflection. I was curious to find out whether students who create portfolios selected from their writings done on topics that catch their attention would produce analysis that comes closer to "historical thinking." For these four students my answer would be a tentative "yes." This, however, was only a first attempt at this kind of project, a first draft which raises many questions and issues that can only be addressed as the project itself is revised. In its present form the portfolio project raises several issues.

One important issue connects to teaching history in diverse classrooms. Three of the four students discussed issues of freedom and discrimination as both historical and current concerns. May and Mandy looked at immigration issues. Clarence, an African American student, directly discussed issues connected to race in each of his excerpts. If we think of these pieces of writing as starting points for discussion, might the chance to choose topics be a way to draw students into a discussion that is fueled and informed by diverse student perspectives? But when we open up discussion in this way we also create new responsibilities for the teacher. Once students are drawn in, developing and expressing a viewpoint, how can the discussion be structured and informed so that the students don't end up with a historical relativism which suggests that all opinions are equally valid if they are based on a personal view? Choice may create interest, but it's important to take advantage of that interest by teaching how to find, weigh, and use evidence to support opinions.

Secondly, while examples of historical thinking may be found in the portfolios, there is little evidence that the students actually understood that they were thinking historically. Can we speak of students' thinking historically if they are not aware that this is the case? Will they transfer this skill to other situations unless expressly asked to within a specific instructional framework? Can the kind of reflective thought asked for in the portfolios help make thinking historically more visible for students?

Finally, what role does instruction play in this endeavor? Each of these students was considered an above-average student. I have no doubt that if they had been asked to answer prepackaged questions they would have completed that work and done it well. But for a student like May this would have been too limiting and frustrating. She wants to be "creative and say what I want to say because the answer is not going to be A, B, C, or D." May might have seen her past work in history as boring, but she also got good grades. How representative is May? I do not yet know how many students, unlike May, are made to feel uneasy when they are no longer able to depend on the trusty end of chapter questions as a way of completing history assignments.

But I can say that each of the four students I've profiled here valued the work they had done during

the school year and valued the opportunity to revisit it. If their work is seen as a starting point, it represents a kind of embryonic historical thinking. But this kind of writing and thinking does not happen on its own; the teacher has to ask for it — encouraging, supporting and evaluating its development.

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## A Poem for Each Student

*continued from page 5*

Harambee! Mrs. Lain:  
(Harambee is an African word for unity)

*I've been a pessimist for a long time. Feeling like there is no hope, sanity, or love left. I hope, now that I've been in your class, our class, that my sour days are over. The people in this class, if they weren't too scared or inhibited, came into this class a little unknowing but left feeling like something truly good went on this year. Something so individual that it couldn't be duplicated. Perhaps others didn't realize what was really going on, but I did and it made me feel good about school for one hour a day.*

Adrienne  
5-27-94

Well, these are hard times for public education. Our classes are too large. Sometimes it seems like we struggle in vain to get just a few teachable moments. We wonder if it's worth it. Language arts teachers feel especially burdened, buried in papers, assigned to teach almost all the basics — reading, writing, listening, speaking, and thinking. But I want to be alive in the classroom. I want to create a classroom world where I can live and thrive, and for me that's a place where each of my kids is recognized and honored. That's one where I observe kids and create a community. Then together we look outward to connect with the world.

*Sheryl Lain is director of the Wyoming Writing Project and a teacher at McCormick Junior High.*

# A Picaresque Tale from the Land of Kidwatching: Teacher Research and Ethical Dilemmas

by

JANE ZENI



For the past ten years, I've been doing classroom action research and working in our Gateway Writing Project with teacher researchers. Action researchers, also called teacher researchers, take a systematic look at their own practices with the idea of improving them. Writing Project people are used to keeping journals, capturing a scene on paper through vivid, personal and social details, and sharing their writing with an audience. For our teachers, the NWP experience seems to lead naturally into action research — jotting field notes, gathering data from close observation or interview, and interpreting the scene in writing for other teachers. I believe in the power of action research for personal and professional growth. But as the National Writing Project becomes increasingly committed to this mode of inquiry, we need to look closely at the problematical issues raised when teachers study their own classrooms.

Classroom action research draws on the qualitative methods and multiple perspectives of educational ethnography. When our work is challenged or misunderstood by parents or administrators, we take pains to distinguish action research from traditional quantitative research: We explain that we don't deal with statistics, control groups,

or manipulated variables, but with the human drama as lived by self-conscious actors. Perhaps it is just as important to distinguish action research from traditional qualitative research: We aren't outsiders peering from the shadows into the classroom, but insiders responsible to the students whose learning we document. The following chart illustrates these different modes of research:

| Traditional Research                                                                  |                                                                                            |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Outsider:                                                                             | Researcher investigating a teacher's practice                                              |
| Quantitative                                                                          | Qualitative                                                                                |
| Classic experiment (techniques of natural science, agriculture)                       | Classic ethnography or case study (techniques of anthropology)                             |
| Goal: to change/improve someone else's teaching/learning                              | Goal: To document someone else's teaching/learning                                         |
| Action Research                                                                       |                                                                                            |
| Insider:                                                                              | Teachers documenting their own practice                                                    |
| Quantitative                                                                          | Qualitative (most, but not all, action research is qualitative)                            |
| Small-scale statistics (holistic scores, word counts, checklists, syntactic measures) | Classroom ethnography, case study, autobiography, curriculum development and field testing |
| Goal: to change/improve one's own teaching/learning                                   | Goal: to change/improve one's own teaching/learning                                        |

Action research usually falls in the lower-right quadrant of the chart: qualitative research by insiders. A teacher-researcher may work alone or in collaboration with a team of colleagues, a seminar or an outside researcher. In any case, what is appropriate for traditional research may be inappropriate for classroom action research by teachers.

The ethical checks and balances used by the outsider doing a classic experiment (random selection, control groups, objectivity) are either irrelevant or problematic for us as teachers. If I'm working to improve my sensitivity to students of a different culture, and I'm gathering data on my efforts, do I really want a control group in which I must be culturally insensitive? In the same way, the ethical safeguards of the outsider doing qualitative research (anonymous informants, disguised settings) may divert us from the action researcher's goal of open communication and collaboration with colleagues, students and parents. If my department has been working to improve the teaching of writing, and students have knowingly helped us by saving their drafts and sharing reflective journals, shouldn't we name and credit them if we publish a report? Teachers researching their own classrooms can anticipate ethical dilemmas quite distinct from those of the outsider doing research, whether quantitative or qualitative.

I'll introduce these dilemmas with a few stories from the experience of teacher researchers in the Gateway Writing Project. These stories emerged from discussions in the Action Research Collaborative in St. Louis and are meant to introduce the guide we have developed: "A Guide to Ethical Issues in Action Research." ARC members are field testing this brief guide to share with others who may embark on a journey of classroom inquiry.

### A Picaresque Tale

As an action researcher, I sometimes feel like a character from a picaresque novel — *Don Quixote*, *Pilgrim's Progress*, *Tom Jones*, *Candide*, or even *The Wizard of Oz*. A picaresque tale takes us on an unpredictable, often bizarre set of adventures, wandering from place to place and from scene to scene, seeking a goal the hero may come to understand only through the journey. The tale I will tell here is episodic and bizarre, but true — a composite of the misadventures, crises and insights I've gained through five journeys with teachers doing research. All identities have been thinly dis-



guised to enhance the story and reduce the risk of further misadventures. So come along, Dear Reader, as I begin my tale.

### Scene 1

In the first episode, we meet a special education teacher working in a program for teenage dropouts under the auspices of the juvenile detention center. His job includes carefully documenting his sessions with the teenagers, their parents, counselors, and others. As a doctoral candidate, he chooses to expand that documentation into a view of the world through the eyes of his kids. Using rich details and the voices of the juvenile offenders, he shows how the simplistic explanations ("They never learned to value education") don't fit the reality of their experience ("Why do they cry when they tell me about dropping out?"). Midwest State University requires a "Human Subjects Review" of all potential research projects.

Our teacher-researcher faces the ordeal bravely, affirming that his subjects will not be given drugs or shock therapy, that all the data is being gathered in the normal course of his role as a teacher, and that, yes, some of the data deals with illegal acts and underage persons. The HSR is rejected. The Committee wants signed permission from the parents of all students to participate in the study and an exact script of the interview protocol!



The crisis is eventually resolved only through the intervention of a higher power, a well-published ethnographer who tells the dean of research that the HSR seems more appropriate to a traditional experiment than to a study documenting a teacher's own practice. (The dean approves the proposal and suggests that faculty engaged in this sort of qualitative, insider research come up with a more appropriate Human Subjects Review document. The best of all possible worlds? Or the labors of Hercules? We'll return to this quest and its outcome in good time. But now we must set off again on our journey.)

## Scene 2

Our next encounter is with an earnest teacher educator, committed to reflective practice and eager to give her pre-service teachers a taste of writing field notes, interpreting, and reporting. Her assignment is simple. All student teachers will choose one child in their own classes for a three-week case study. During this time, their regular student teaching journal will be devoted to case study field notes. Student teachers will also gather any additional data that are legally accessible to them by talking with colleagues and coaches and by observing the chosen student in out-of-class activities.

The teachers-to-be set out with their journals and our earnest teacher dozes off with a smile, imagining their discoveries — only to be awakened by a phone call from an anxious member of the group who was placed in a highly traditional, rural school district. Formerly a psychiatric nurse, the student teacher asks, "Don't these case studies have to be confidential?" She is assured that pseudonyms are required in the final reports. "But we must need parents' permission. What if we have damaging information in our field notes — doesn't a doctor or somebody monitor what we write?" It seems that the student has alerted her cooperating teacher, who has spoken to the department chair and principal. Since the administration wants to protect family values above all, the earnest teacher educator is told that student teachers may not be welcome at this school in the future.

This crisis is not resolved until three deans intercede on behalf of the embattled teacher educator, who bandages her wounds and calls it a learning experience. The next semester, she drafts a detailed assignment sheet, makes copies for each school, and adds a cover letter asking principals to advise her of specific rules and restrictions in their district.

And now, Dear Reader, let us rest by the side of the road and reflect on the questions these two adventures have generated:

*Do teachers have a right to look and listen intensely?  
To write down what they observe?  
To share what they write? (with a seminar? with the world?)  
When does a teacher's routine documentation become research?*

Only the voice of the wind responds, with answers that are uninterpretable. But, magically, two maxims appear traced in the sand:

*Action research is not medicine, psychology or therapy.  
The "subject" is myself as well as my student.*

## Scene 3

Of course these two maxims cannot tell the whole story. Let us turn back toward the city to visit a team of urban teacher researchers, most of them African American, who are beginning to document their own practices in collaboration with the Writing Project.

The team leader and her administrator in the city public schools have called a meeting with the Writing Project director to discuss the plan. The director is not prepared for the challenge that awaits her. "What will you do with our data?" asks the administrator. "If my teachers do this research, will their names be on the report — or yours?" It seems the administrator is still rankling from a series of encounters with researchers from the university. "And one more question. How do you know that your treatment won't have some damaging effects on our children, on children of color?"

Afterwards, the team leader admits that she herself has some doubts about the study. "I feel a little like Nurse Evers," she says, referring to the Black woman hired by Alabama medical researchers to recruit indigent syphilis patients for an experimental "treatment": no drugs, careful documentation, and slow death! The Writing Project director is speechless.

She wanders alone through crowded city streets, pondering these ever-more-puzzling misconstruals. At last she sees a pattern in the data. Stopping at a coffee shop, she scribbles on her napkin:



*Action research is not an experiment with subjects,  
statistics, and treatments under the control of  
some outside scholar.*

*Action research must be owned and operated by  
teachers.*

In this crisis, the Writing Project Director cannot turn for help to any deans in shining armor. Fortunately, the team leader continues to speak her own truth as a Black woman and as a teacher researcher. The team moves slowly, negotiating each issue every step of the way. But in three years these teachers have become leaders in the regional action research movement, and the city district is one of the strongest voices supporting the Writing Project.

#### Scene 4

The scene shifts to a suburban district known for elegant, tree-shaded estates and small but pleasant bungalows. There, an established action research team has been gathering data on their students "at risk," including a disproportionate number of African American males. Teachers want to observe these students reading, writing, talking in their own classrooms, hoping to rethink their practice so that all their kids — Black and White, male and female — can succeed.

The action researchers, most of them White and female, huddle in the teachers' lounge comforting one another after an ordeal at a major conference. An African American teacher had interrupted their presentation with "Why are you singling out our kids as your subjects?" Another member of the audience asked why the district didn't just hire more Black teacher researchers.

"What they really meant," mutters the team leader, "was how can a bunch of White broads hope to tackle Black male underachievement!" She looks around at her colleagues and laughs. "I finally said, 'We know the kids need Black male role models, but unfortunately we're all they have!'"

She shakes her head, recognizing the irony. "When this project began, despite our good intentions, we'd talk about diagnosing and resolving the problems of minority writers without always questioning our own role in those problems. But that's not where we're coming from today." The process of action research and exposure to work by African American educators have turned the team around.

"We tried to tell this guy about self-reflection, about fixing our own underachievement," laments her colleague, "but he just didn't get it." Team members finish the last of the microwave popcorn and scatter to join their families. Someone leaves a note pinned to the bulletin board:

*If you're not an insider, you just don't get it.*

*Action research can help you get inside the experience  
of people from a different culture, class, or  
gender.*

*And then you just might get it.*

This story, Dear Reader, is also one of gradual change rather than heroic action. In time, the White teachers gain a second sight, a cultural fluency if you will. In time, they could share their journey with African American teachers and usually get beyond the initial suspicion to real dialog. But now we must be on our way.

---

***Action research is not an experiment  
with subjects, statistics, and  
treatments under the control  
of some outside scholar.***

***Action research must be owned and  
operated by teachers.***

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#### Scene 5

Trudging down a shady boulevard, we hear rumors that the Celestial City is near at hand. The scene is a small elite district where the dynamic new superintendent has just hired a consultant in qualitative research from the Writing Project. She will collaborate with a primary teacher to do an ethnographic evaluation of the teacher's whole language program — the administrator wants some rich classroom portraits and case studies. The consultant is thrilled to have found a land where people understand and value action research.

For the next three months, she spends hours in the classroom and writes field notes documenting how children become literate in this environment. The teacher is an experienced action researcher. She has permission slips from all her students, a newsletter to communicate with parents, and several publications

describing innovative work in her classroom. Each day the teacher and her research partner share their notes and insights. Finally, the consultant presents a sixty-page document including eight case studies (all with pseudonyms), samples of student writing, and scripts of classroom talk.

The superintendent is delighted — until she starts to picture the school board's reaction to the document. The case studies and classroom portraits are indeed rich. In a class of twenty three, every child can be recognized! The superintendent places an emergency call to the consultant, who learns that she must now produce a ten-page summary of her document, without reference to any particular child. "How can I write a case study without showing a real kid?" she wails. "Better to write a tale with no hero." Calming down at last, she reflects and writes in her journal:

*Gathering data in my own classroom to present to a public audience raises ethical issues quite different from other modes of teacher publication. When I as a teacher publish a short story, even one that draws on my own life or the lives of my students, I can transform the details in such a way that no individual will be recognized. When I publish an autobiography the risk of embarrassment is greater, but I am writing about my own life and the relationships at risk are my own. Even when an outside researcher studies my classroom, the report may disguise not only the teacher and children but also the school, district, and community to protect those who have been observed with the ethnographer's eye.*

*On the other hand, when I as a third grade teacher in Podunk, USA, publish my own classroom research (whether alone or in collaboration), I will expose not only myself but also my children to public scrutiny. Once I identify myself and my school, I cannot fully disguise my students. And their behavior in our intimate classroom setting is exposed to the unpredictable response of adults who have not been personally admitted. (To visit my local public school, I must stop at the office, introduce myself, and get permission to sit in a teacher's class; to read that teacher's report in an action research journal, I need no such invitation.)*

Rereading her own words she mutters, "OK, so now what do I do?"

The consultant eventually conquers her task with a literary sleight of hand. Retaining much of the rich descriptive text, she carefully avoids linking the identifying descriptions to specific children. Observe, Gentle Reader:

*One group writes a play based on Flossie and the Fox. The book's narration is in standard English, but most of the characters speak a rural Southern Black dialect. The five children who have chosen this project include two international students, one urban transfer student, one special education student, one first grader, one second grader, and three third graders. (Some fit more than one category.) Children recast each scene in the book as a script. They take turns writing dialog at the computer, print out a script for each actor, then practice as a group (coaching one another to get the right voice for each character, even the suave fox). Children differing in age, race, and culture write and perform enthusiastically.*

Older, wiser, tired, and rather pleased with herself, the consultant bids farewell to the classroom of twenty-three children and returns home to cultivate her garden, saying, "There's no place like home." But first she grabs a marking pen from the plastic tub and makes a poster to display her learning:

*Writing action research is not like writing ethnography, with anonymous informants and fictional settings.*

*Writing action research is a literary open house starring the kids in my own classroom.*

And so my tale is told, my journey ended. But what wisdom have we gained from our five adventures? Can we generalize from such stories? Can we turn a picaresque tale into a code of ethics?

You remember, Dear Reader, the challenge set forth by the dean of research. He called for an alternative to the "human subjects review," a document posing the ethical questions most relevant to action research. A few years ago, I did, in fact, take up this challenge as a member of the St. Louis Action Research Collaborative and ARC's ad hoc committee on ethics. We hoped to compile a questionnaire that might be adopted for reviewing teachers' research proposals in the master's and doctoral programs of our local universities.

Our committee began with the human subject reviews

Our committee began with the human subject reviews currently in use, all of them implicitly designed for the traditional academic study. We examined ethics documents from four universities and three professional associations, only to find much of the same material. ("Humph! This won't do," I mused. "Yet perhaps, if Don Quixote can transform a kitchen maid into Dulcinea, I just might be able to transform these documents into something to guide an earnest action researcher!")



After many drafts and several discussions in ARC's teacher educators' seminar, our impossible task began to emerge in a new guise. The more we had tried to set firm guidelines, to pin down the criteria for review, the more we had seen that ethical decisions were sensitive to context. Should a teacher's field notes be shared with students? Administrators? The public? When must parents be involved in a teacher's reflection on her practice? To place such decisions in the hands of academics who were not action researchers could create more problems than it would solve.

Abandoning the quest for an alternative "human subjects review," we drafted *A Guide to Ethical Issues and Action Research* for teachers. Here are a few samples of the more-or-less provocative questions used in the guide:

**Regarding the researcher's purpose:** What does your research aim to understand? What does your research aim to change?

**Regarding the people traditionally viewed as subjects:** Analyze the power relations. Which people (e.g. students, parents) do you have some power over? Which people (e.g. principals, professors) have some power over you?

**Regarding informed consent:** Which of the research participants at your school have read your proposal? Which ones have been informed of the research orally in some detail? Which ones know little or nothing about the problem? Explain and justify the decisions behind your answers.

**Regarding cultural bias:** Will your study attempt to read the experience of people who differ from you in race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation? How have you prepared yourself to share the perspective of the "other"? Have you provided for consultation or triangulation by adult members of the community?

Most of these questions defy simple solutions. Many of the problematical ones don't appear on any of the review documents we examined, but they are central to action research by and with classroom teachers. The Action Research Collaborative offers the *Guide* for teachers planning such projects to discuss with their research teams or thesis advisors. We hope that by mapping some of the road hazards before setting off on their journeys, teachers may less often blunder into legal, moral, and cultural quicksand.

**Note:** The National Writing Project will provide interested readers with the *Guide to Ethical Issues in Action Research*, free of charge. Just drop a note to the Quarterly office with your request and mailing address. The *Guide* was drafted by Jane Zeni for the Teacher Educators' Seminar of the St. Louis Action Research Collaborative; the Gateway Writing Project is a founding member of ARC.

Zeni, J. (1995). *Guide to ethical issues and action research*. St. Louis, MO: Action Research Collaborative. Available on request from the National Writing Project.

Jane Zeni is director of the Gateway Writing Project in St. Louis, Missouri.

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# NWP & UPDATE

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## Project Outreach is Almost Here

The National Writing Project has been awarded a four-year \$2 million grant from the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund. The grant is earmarked for the NWP's Project Outreach, a network aimed specifically at improving writing instruction in schools with large numbers of students from low-income backgrounds. Eighteen rural, urban and suburban sites will be chosen to participate in the first phase of the program.

With this grant, the Dewitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund continues the assistance it has provided the National Writing Project since 1991 when a grant from the Fund made possible creation of the Urban Sites Network, a professional development network engaging 10 urban sites. The latest grant continues the Fund's mission, which is to foster fundamental improvement in the quality of educational and career development opportunities for all school-age youth and to increase access to these improved services for young people in low-income communities.

"Our grant will enable the NWP to reach even more teachers who work with low-income youth," said George V. Grune, chairman of the Fund. "Many of these teachers are in locations where they don't have access to the kind of quality professional development that can help them increase their teaching skills so they can serve their students."

NWP executive director Richard Sterling concurs. "This grant will allow us to provide resources to Writing Projects in places where they are scarce, where children in schools face difficult barriers to effective learning and where teachers face a wide array of obstacles that prevent effective instruction."

According to Elyse Eidman-Aadahl, director of Project Outreach, sites participating in the Project will strive to serve 20 percent more teachers of low-income stu-

dents each year than they currently do, and their development programs will be more relevant to the needs of these educators. In addition, Project Outreach sites will work hard to increase the diversity of the local project leadership.

All NWP sites have been invited to apply for participation in Project Outreach. Applications must arrive at the NWP office no later than January 31, 1996. A twelve-person National Leadership Team will select the 18 sites for the first phase of the Project Outreach network.

Sites which are selected will participate in a national conversation about effective professional development and will receive annual site grants to support local self-study related to the objectives of the program.

According to Eidman-Aadahl, "The Project Outreach network will have an opportunity for sites that want to make self-study a priority of the next three years. They'll be able to leave the project with a much clearer understanding of their past and present work, and they'll have clearly defined goals for improving teaching and learning among kids from low income families."

### Fred Hechinger, Friend of Education

The National Center for the Study of Writing is saddened by the loss of our National Advisory Board chair, Fred M. Hechinger. We will miss his wise counsel, generous guidance, and influential writing on behalf of school children. Our deepest sympathy to his wife, Grace, and his sons.

—Sarah Warshauer Freedman, CSW Director

## Call for Manuscripts

*We welcome lively, well-written articles on the writing process and on teaching writing, as well as articles on research in the teaching of it. The articles can take the form of personal experience or opinion, or can explore the work of others who have contributed to the field.*

*We are especially interested in articles by classroom teachers. If you have an idea you would like to develop, send a query letter or give us a call at 510-642-0976. Send ideas, drafts, and completed manuscripts (if possible include a disk) to: The NWP/CSW Quarterly, Graduate School of Education, 5627 Tolman Hall, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720.*

— The Editors

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# *The Quarterly*

OF THE NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT & THE CENTER FOR THE STUDY  
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**Bilingual Third Graders Research Writing**  
(see page 1)

# CONTENTS

## WRITING TEACHERS TALK SHOP

- When Third-Grade Writers  
Do Case Studies 1  
JANET KIDDOO
- Why Ronnie Wrote about Cars 3  
BONNIE M. FAIMAN
- Sam and Ansley's Story 5  
ANSLEY DAUENHAUER
- Writing for the Rest of Us 8  
ART PETERSON
- How to Practically Guarantee Poor Student Writing —  
Without Even Trying 12  
DIANE BOEHM

## PERSPECTIVES

- The More Things Change... 13  
Or Do They?

## VIEWPOINT

- The Tattlers' Tales: 18  
Some Authentic Writing from Six-Year-Olds

## CONNECTIONS: RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

- Literacy and Numeracy in a Changing Workplace 20  
MARK JURY AND MIRA KATZ

## BOOK REVIEWS

- Other People's Children: 29  
Cultural Conflict in the Classroom  
JOSEPH CHECK
- If Not Now: Developmental Readers in the 33  
College Classroom  
BARBARA KAPLAN BASS

## NWP & CSW UPDATE

36

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ELIZABETH CREWS

# When Third-Grade Writers Do Case Studies

by

JANET KIDDOO



When I responded to a cry for help last year from a bilingual first-grade teacher at my school who wanted to organize a writing workshop in her class, I could not have predicted where this would lead. I volunteered my bilingual third graders as helpers to my colleague because she was understandably nervous at the thought of being alone with 33 non-writers let loose to choose their own topics.

Before my students invaded the first-grade classroom, however, I realized that there were some issues that I needed to take up with them. I believed that if my students were to work successfully with these younger children, they would need to understand some things about writing and spelling development. I drew my students into a discussion of Richard Gentry's developmental stages of spelling, describing

but not labeling the stages. I wanted my students to understand that writing and spelling evolve naturally in much the same way as walking and talking. Many of my students had younger siblings or relatives who they had watched crawl, toddle, and then walk. I wanted my students to realize that young children go through a similar development as scribbles eventually become letters, words and pictures.

I also faced another problem. What would my students, many of them emergent writers themselves, teach these first graders? I helped my students answer this question by asking them to look back at stories they had written. How had they developed as writers? What could they do in their later stories that they were unable to do in their earlier ones? Edgar, one of my most limited writers, recognized that he had

learned how to sound out letters and write at least one vowel for each word he attempted to write. Victor, another emergent writer, noticed that he had learned to separate words, and Zaina discovered that in her writing she used to confuse "d" and "b." By examining their own learning, my students were beginning to get a sense of how others learn and what could be taught.



When my third graders finally met the first graders, they were eager to encourage their assigned students to write. The interaction in the first-grade classroom was surprisingly calm in spite of almost sixty children in one room. The third graders squeezed in between small desks and chairs to be at eye level with their young tutees. They coached the little ones by showing them how to sound out letters and do invented spellings. The third graders smiled and nodded as many first graders shared "stories" consisting of strings of random letters, numbers and squiggly lines. I watched my students imitate my own behavior as they nudged the more reluctant students to at least put marks on their papers.

At this point, a natural alliance formed between the two classes, but I wanted my students to be more than peer tutors. I wanted them to be keen observers of first-grade writers and to think about what they were learning while helping younger children. When my

students returned to our classroom after these mentoring sessions, they would record and reflect on what happened. My third graders became teacher researchers.

Looking back at my students' notes a year after this experience, I found that these novice teacher researchers had faced the same kind of problems and made the same kind of discoveries as their adult counterparts.

Like adults, the young researchers were sometimes dismayed by how little their students knew. "Yo aprendi que los niños de primer grado no saben escribir muy bien" (I learned that first graders don't write very well), said Daniel, a very logical third grader. I responded with a plea for understanding. "Son muy jóvenes!" (They're very young!). And while it may have taken these third graders awhile to adjust to these beginning writers, they also came to realize that their students made more progress when they were encouraged rather than criticized.

Irma wrote, "[I did] not say anything mean because that would have made the first grader feel bad." The mentors came to appreciate small steps: "Ya está mejorando poco a poco" (He is improving little by little).

Like adult researchers, the third graders learned to stay on the lookout for what confused them. Why was it, for instance, that a boy named Doroteo consistently wrote his name as ADAlotc? Also, like their mature counterparts, the students came to expect surprises. A story that made no sense at all when the first grader wrote it became perfectly clear later when the child "read" it.

These young mentors came to understand that each learner is different. Salvador discovered that although he enjoyed the picture and words a little boy had done about "un cuento del cuete con estrellas y la luna" (a

*continued on page 28*



# Why Ronnie Wrote about Cars

by

BONNIE M. FAIMAN



Our school psychologist parks his motorcycle, a Harley Davidson, next to my car in the school parking lot. The students are very impressed with how cool an older person can be. Some other teachers drive sports vehicles, and one teacher owns a red truck with dual gas tanks. All these teachers are cool.

The sixth-period physical education class must pass through the parking lot to get to and from the track and soccer fields. So everyone's car is up for scrutiny.

Seventh period I teach language arts to these twelve-year-olds, and I am used to them coming into my class with cars on the brain. What I had not been prepared for, however, was Ronnie's automobile obsession.

Sometimes I read picture books aloud and show the students the pictures. Through their journals, they respond to the relationships of the characters in the stories and sometimes write about the plot. They love this exercise, and I do too.

We read *Wilfred Gordon McDonald Partridge* by Mem Fox. It is a tender tale about a young boy and the residents he meets in a nursing home. One student said it all:

*A little boy made his older friends know that life is worth living and helped them realize that life is nothing without memories.*

Ronnie, a subdued child, apparently with his own repertoire of memories, wrote at a furious pace. Even though there are no cars in the story, a car was prominent in Ronnie's journal entry:

*Last year my father and I went with my little brother to get a hair cut, one just like the little boy in the story. My father had a small car then, yellow. The car only played one channel on the radio but we took it around town anyway.*

Weeks went by. I read *Owl Moon* by Jane Yolen to the class. Most students wrote about their grandparents and themselves, apropos of the story. One child said:

*When the owl was sitting on a branch watching the little boy and his grandfather, I thought how my own Papa Joe loved animals and taught me to love them too.*

Ronnie wrote:

*Owling reminds me of cars, hooting horns like owl talk and speeding wings moving down and down, just missing tree branches, sometimes even not missing them.*

I thought about Isaac Bashevis Singer's observation, "If you write about the things and the people you know best, you discover your roots." I began to wonder about Ronnie's roots.

Sometime later, I read aloud a portion of Chapter Three of *The Cay* by Theodore Taylor. This time I modeled a technique I picked up at a workshop to prompt students' literature journal entries. I asked for responses in three categories: (1) What I know I know about the book (2) What I think I know about the book and (3) What I want to know about the book.

Most of my 26 students responded enthusiastically to this excerpt. They wanted to read this book. Many had strong opinions about the main character, Phillip: "Phillip makes me mad. He has a bad attitude" or "I think Phillip will learn to understand about survival and maturity." But they did not pay all that much attention to the categories I had set up.

Ronnie, however, *did* write about what he thought he knew about the book:

*So far this book is o.k. What I think I know is how people feel. Theodore Taylor wrote, 'There were sounds of metal wrenching and much shouting.' I am good at picturing this in my mind. I picture a Ford Mustang.*

I asked Ronnie to stay after school. When he did, I handed him paper and told him he could write. Ronnie had always written easily in his journal, but increasingly he had developed a preoccupation with daydreaming. That afternoon I sadly learned why. He wrote:

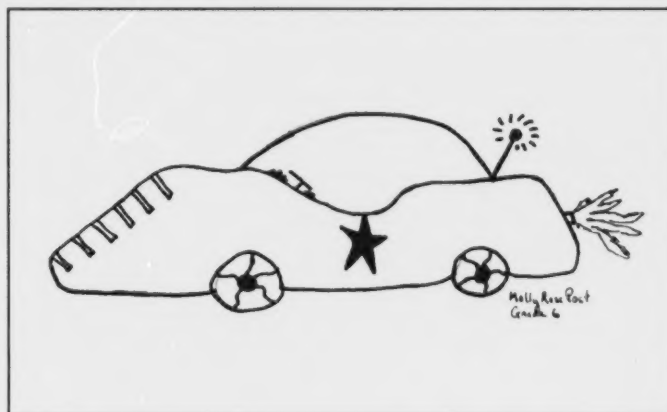
#### *A Day I Will Never Forget*

*I've never seen my father cry but last July 4th, he did. I remember everything that happened that day. It was hot and I was in the pool in my backyard. It started to rain so my mother told me to come in. My sister was waiting for her boyfriend to come. She had told him to come at 1 o'clock but it was now 4 PM. She was starting to get worried so she called his mom but the lady said he had left long ago. An hour later my sister's boyfriend's brother called my father to say that he was dead. He died in a car accident on the way*

*to our house. My father tried to hide it from my sister but she found out. That's a day I will never forget.*

— Ronnie

He finished and silently got up to leave the room to take the late bus home. I asked Ronnie if he wanted to discuss his paper. He said "No."



"Do you want to write more?"

"No."

"Would you like to take this paper home to show your family?"

"No."

"Do you want to talk to a guidance counselor?"

"No."

"Thank you," he said. He was smiling. It was the first smile I had seen in a long succession of frowns.

This was a personal catharsis for Ronnie and a learning experience for me. What I learned was that, given the chance, what is inside the child may come out on the paper, as it did with Ronnie. If he avoids the assignment but writes about family tragedies, let it be. If he writes about cars but his focus is on the tears of his sister, let it be. On that day Ronnie and I both learned that writing can cleanse the soul, can nudge feelings to the surface, can make us begin to feel whole after life has torn us asunder. Writing can give us peace.

Bonnie M. Faiman teaches language arts at Walsh Middle School in Framingham, Massachusetts.

# Sam and Ansley's Story

by

ANSLEY DAUENHAUER



*Grayson snorted. "Story? I don't know no stories."*

*"Sure you do," Maniac prodded. "Everybody has a story."*

*"Not me." Grayson was edging for the door. "I ain't got no story. I ain't nobody." (from Maniac McGee by Jerry Spinelli)*

As I read these lines, I see a plethora of faces permanently ingrained on my yearly student mosaic, students who have shared Grayson's reluctance to tell stories. But perhaps it is Sam who stands out most vividly in this mental collage. When I looked at Sam, I wanted to cry in both frustration and sadness. A tiny third grader, his clothes swallowed him while his shoes clearly pinched. It was difficult to detect emotion in his brown eyes since they were usually closed in exhaustion; Sam never knew where he would be sleeping.

Many of the other students came from equally deprived backgrounds, but their eyes didn't reflect the vacuousness that haunted Sam. They did not seem to realize that Sam could neither read nor write. They ignored him; they did not pick him for their teams nor did they make fun of him. He was a nonmember of their classroom community. To further separate Sam from his classmates, school personnel pulled him out of class daily for several hours of special assistance. Isolated and failing, Sam responded by sleeping through the day.

As a Latin resource teacher, I taught the third graders mythology. They loved it. These inner-city students simply could not get enough of Medusa, Pegasus, and Perseus. They created advertisements for imaginary products and gave them names derived from mythology. They were fascinated by the Roman culture and lifestyle. And they read and read and read. The school librarian couldn't keep the mythology section stocked since the kids checked out all of the books. The more myths I read to them, the happier they were.

Then one day, Shanequa shyly presented me with a story she had written at home. Thrilled by this unsolicited assignment, I encouraged her to read it aloud to the class. Unwittingly, I had given students what they had been craving, a method of publication. Later I realized that most children become highly motivated to write when they know they'll be sharing their stories.

The myths trickled in. Soon nearly everyone was doing unassigned writing at home, and they all wanted to share. We decided to publish a class book of myths. Each third grader selected his or her best myth for publication — except for Sam. Sam didn't have any myths from which to choose; he didn't have much to show for his year of Latin. As the other students began to feel empowered by their ability to tell a story, Sam continued to sit slumped at his desk, asleep.

What little Sam knew of writing reinforced his sense of failure. The traditional classroom environment had

forced him to ignore his stories until he had acquired the "right" vocabulary, the "right" spelling, and the "right" grammar. His stories had been suppressed until he felt he had no story to tell. Asleep and failing, Sam avoided humiliation by not caring. He hadn't failed because he tried; he simply wasn't trying.

While my students were discovering their power as authors, I was discovering the Writing Project which, in turn, introduced me to Nancie Atwell. Suddenly, so much of what went on in my classroom made sense. Of course the students wanted opportunities to publish; with a public forum for their writing, they were beginning to unlock the entire writing process.

But it was Atwell's story of Jeff to which I related most intensely. Jeff had drawn pictures in her class. Though he would always return the next day with a story, Atwell repeatedly discouraged his drawing, which she considered wasted time. He clung to this stage of his writing process, a stage Atwell later recognized as his method of organizing his thoughts.

When Sam wasn't asleep in my class, he too was drawing pictures. And slowly I began to wonder if Sam's pictures were his attempt at organization. Unlike Jeff, however, he didn't have the language skills to translate his picture into words.

One day, as I watched Sam busily sketching his next picture, my eye also caught Charles in the background. Charles had long since chosen his myth, polished it, and turned in his final draft. Perhaps what Sam needed was a middleman, someone to give written form to the ideas in his illustration. I explained to Charles that I wanted him to help Sam write his story. Charles peered up at me thoroughly perplexed. No one in the class had anything to do with Sam. "Ah, Mrs. D., do I have to?"

Expecting the same reluctance on Sam's part, I steeled myself. But to my surprise, Sam began talking before Charles could roll his eyes once more and unhappily slink into the vacant desk. Charles took Sam's dictation for the rest of the class period, although none-too-willingly. Sam was a nonentity in the classroom, and any association with him might pull Charles into those depths as well. But the following Wednesday when it was Latin time, Sam grabbed Charles, "You gonna write for me again?" and headed to the back table. And Charles followed.

A few moments later, I heard Charles reacting to something Sam had to say. "Nah, that's stupid. You listen to the story?" Charles dragged himself out of the chair to borrow the Medusa myth from the front of the room. As he reread the story to Sam, Charles slumped over the book, his languid pose announcing to the class that his current assignment was not his choice. Sam, one-half Charles' height, bounced beside the desk and burrowed into the story, eagerly connecting words to the illustration, perhaps for the first time.

"The horse flies?" Sam questioned doubtfully.

"Look. Right here! Right here it says that he is winged. That means he has wings. He can fly." Reaching a point of exasperation with Sam, Charles jammed the picture with his finger, "See? See, he has wings!"

Sam studied the picture intently and then the words. "But what about the guy, you know that god. He can fly?"

With a heavy sigh, Charles heaved the pages over to another chapter. "Mercury," he said resignedly. "Mercury can fly too."

Sam had never willingly had a book open in front of him, and he certainly had never searched the pages for information of any kind. With Charles as a guide, Sam connected the words to the illustrations, and considered information that he might use in his own myth.

And with Charles as a middleman, suddenly Sam had a story — HIS story. The next time the class wrote troublesome spelling words on the board, Sam raised his hand. To my utter amazement, he wanted to know how to spell *shield*. Upon studying the spelling on the board, he gravely scratched out his partner's attempt and copied the correct sequence of letters. When we talked about punctuation, Sam pointed to his piece and said, "Mrs D., if I use two of these [!] it'd be better."

Sam was suddenly a participating member of his classroom community. He had words to spell and important decisions, like punctuation, to make. Previously, he had been unable to take an active role in the class because he hadn't possessed the necessary raw materials, in this case a rough draft to work with. Now he not only had a story, but he wanted everyone to read it in the book. For it to be public domain, he subconsciously realized that he needed to follow cer-



**Sam and Medusa**

One day I woke up. Then Jupiter screamed Sam!! Sam!! Medusa is free again. So I got out of bed and got my shield and my sword. Then a lady screamed Sam!! Sam!! Medusa is on the mountain. I climbed and stabbed her in the back. Then on Mercury's wings we think "Up up Sam. Up up Sam," to get away from her.

— Sam

tain conventions, like spelling and punctuation. When their final drafts were typed and returned to them, the children illustrated their stories. This class period was perhaps the only time I did not have to prod work out of Sam. At the end of Latin, he shoved his way through all of the children to show me his very simple drawing. "Look here, Mrs. D. Here I wrote 'Up, up,' just like it says in the story." From a child whose handwriting I had scarcely seen before, such a story was nothing short of a masterpiece!

Most importantly, Sam had merged his picture with his story, linking the two with words, and in doing so he made an enormous intellectual leap. Through the Pegasus and Mercury exchange, Charles had demon-

strated repeatedly and unintentionally the intrinsic connection between the picture and the language of the story. Sam was able to see language for the first time as a whole. The words could explicate the picture in great detail, while the picture could simultaneously breathe life into the language. No longer obstacles, words became an aspect of and an avenue to the meaning. Sam was becoming a literate human being.

When their anthologies came out in book form, no one could get a copy faster than Sam. He read and read and read. He read his story to me, to the classroom teacher, to the janitor, to his peers. We all memorized Sam's story.

Sam's newfound enthusiasm wasn't entirely contagious. The other students heard his story so many times they began, with Charles as their leader, to taunt him, "Up, up, Sam... Up up, Sam." But Sam genuinely didn't seem to mind. If anything, he just basked in their attention. They teased him, and he just grinned and teased right back. Human beings need response to their actions, and for the first time, Sam was receiving confirmation of his being in that class. He was being granted membership in the third grade. When Charles, as a class leader, acknowledged him and his story, the rest of the class began to do the same. And Sam could now begin the long road to real acceptance.

Perhaps now that Sam has seen that language can include as well as exclude, his classmates' chant, "Up, up, Sam," will carry him into more successful school experiences. Though the end of the year came, and Sam disappeared into the summer, he is indelibly in my mental collage because he discovered the power to author his own story. Sam demonstrated to me the real power of writing: the authority to write our own ideas and the authority to make conscious decisions concerning what we do and who we are.

*Ansley Dauenhauser teaches second grade in the Morgan County school system in Madison, Georgia. She wrote this article about her experience as a Latin resource teacher at the J.G. Smith Magnet Academy in Savannah, Georgia. She is a teacher consultant with the Coastal Georgia Writing Project.*



# Writing for the Rest of Us

by

ART PETERSON

*Recently I spoke to a high school English teacher about the possibility of implementing writing workshops in her classes. She agreed that her sophomores might benefit from such a program but felt it would be inappropriate for her juniors, since "They already know how to write!"*

*However, most of us find learning to write a lifelong challenge. My most recent mentor is my colleague and friend, Art Peterson, whom Quarterly readers know for his passionate quest for clear, lively, insightful prose. Before becoming editor for the National Writing Project, Art taught high school English and history for thirty-two years, writing books and publishing curricular materials in his "spare time." Several years ago, Miriam Ylvisaker, then NWP Editor, asked Art if he'd consider writing a book about writing. The result is *The Writer's Workout Book: 113 Stretches Toward Better Prose*, containing forty brief essays and over a hundred writing activities that can be used by aspiring writers and composition teachers alike. True to his own advice, Art's essays and minilessons are a pleasure to read, full of his unique wit as well as sound instruction for writers. Here we excerpt Art's opening essay which boldly proclaims that writing is a skill, not a gift — a skill that can be taught and learned. Due out this spring, *The Writer's Workout Book* can be ordered through the National Writing Project.*

—PTL



I have a warm spot in my heart for used lesson plans. Along with unspent lire and the keys to a long-gone Dodge Dart, these documents have made it to the "Someday This Stuff Will Come In Handy" corner of my basement. Now, I have had the opportunity to burrow through years of personal classroom history, sorting out the inspired ideas and good tries from the false starts and bad judgments. Out of this rummaging, I've created 113 writing workouts to help students, and especially teachers, think about the small steps writers take as they learn their craft.

I say especially teachers because I suspect I am not the only teacher who has felt uneasy teaching "Writing." For me, what writers do has always seemed kind of artsy and exotic. The writer's life was a big jump from the tenured and bureaucratic existence to which I had submitted myself. I was too (blush) normal to know much about writing. I had been neither On The

Road nor Over the Cuckoo's Nest. The black dogs of depression that drove Franz Kafka to great literature had seldom intruded on the core optimism which allowed me to thrive as a teacher. Sure, I had been a writer, but mostly a writer of "curriculum guides." I ask you, would Norman Mailer be caught dead writing a curriculum guide?

These were my insecurities when I was invited to spend five weeks one summer as a teacher-consultant with the Bay Area Writing Project. I am not going to tell you that this experience — with its requirement that the participants write — awakened some inner muse and unsealed a vein of talent I did not know I had. No. Rather, I began to wonder if talent wasn't — well — overrated. Working through many revisions, I came to believe what the ads from the Famous Writers' School had been telling me all along: Writing can, indeed, be learned.

52

Even more importantly, I came to see that as a teacher of writing my job was not to scout out fledgling candidates for some future Book Critics' Circle Award, but rather to use writing to help all students learn to think, including — maybe even especially — those students who, in their lives, will write very little. I saw that the future waitpersons, stockbrokers and garage mechanics in my class needed the writer's ability to generate, develop, organize, alter and evaluate ideas just as much as the student who would someday take a shot at the Great American Novel.

From then on my job as a teacher became to isolate, teach and connect the practical attitudes and skills which would help my students act like writers. I began to think of writing as The Basic Skill, essential not only for the bookish kids who were already trying out reasonable facsimiles of Sylvia Plath, but also for those students who would someday argue with a landlord, tell a joke or court a lover. So just what is it that writers do that we should all be doing?

#### Writers Speak Up

H.L. Mencken once described writing for a living as a kind of personality disorder: "[The writer's] overpowering impulse is to gyrate before his fellow men, flapping his wings and emitting defiant yells. This being forbidden by the police, he yells on paper. Such is the thing called self-expression."

I have no doubt that, on many a Saturday night, any number of the students I have taught have carried on vigorously in the manner Mencken describes. Monday morning, however, is a different story. How do we nudge students to flap their arms on paper, to have confidence that their experience is worth gyrating about?

As a teacher of writing, I have spent many hours prodding students into believing in the importance of sharing what is unique about them.

"Why don't you write about that?" I ask an American-born Korean girl who is describing the fights which occur between her and her immigrant mother each time the girl wants to wear white — a color associated with death in Korean culture. "Why would anyone else care?" she wonders.

"I don't think it's very interesting," demurs the babysitter who, in an essay, has just exposed in ironic detail the hyper-rigid child-rearing practices

of the 60s radical for whom she babysits. When I tell her that some people would pay for this information, she allows herself a slight smile. The workouts in Part I of this book are intended to help novice writers such as these develop confidence in the value of their experience.

#### Writers Pay Attention

The writing classroom is not the place for a test every Friday. Whatever seeds are sown cannot be harvested at weekly intervals, and indeed, they may sprout and blossom only years later.

I was reminded of this understanding when I ran across an "average" student of several years previous who had just seen soon-to-be Vice President Al Gore up close.

"His hands don't fit his body," she said. "He's got these fingers that start thick and grow thin at the ends. He's a big guy, and he is always moving these delicate hands around as he talks. It makes him seem pretty sensitive for a jock type."

I wanted to change her grade. The woman had learned — alas, maybe not from me — what I was trying to teach: She was paying attention.

While students are in my class, I want them to learn to take in everything, a habit I try to model. I believe I lead a richer life because I've learned to see like a writer. I am addicted to noticing both the trivial — the principal's socks that don't quite match today — and the important — the tough kid who winces ever so slightly as I read aloud a Karl Shapiro poem, demonstrating that maybe he is not as immune to the power of poetry as he claims.

Part II of *The Writer's Workout Book* presents challenges to sharpen observation skills.

#### Writers Think First

In a culture in which a "dialogue" is often composed of advocates and critics of cross-dressing yelling at each other between commercials on *Sally Jessie Raphael*, writers provide an anchor of reasonableness. Writers — at least good writers — don't jabber or blurt. They organize their minds. They provide models that convince even when they irritate.

When we sign on as teachers, we commit ourselves to battling nonsense. I can't say my classroom has al-

ways been a bastion of orderly thought, but when a colleague told me, somewhat disapprovingly, that students came out of my class "pretty left brainy," I took this remark as a compliment.

When I have thought about my teaching goals, I have sometimes conceived a scenario in which, maybe ten years into the future, any one of the thousands of students who have been through my classroom will, one night, unable to sleep, flick on a late night radio call-in show and hear someone speaking in hushed tones of suppressed cancer cures or of scientists who have met mysterious deaths after designing automobiles that run on mineral water or of the first American moon landing that was, says the caller, a mirror trick. And the former student will ask the darkness, "Says who?"

The workouts in Part III of this book promote the power of logical argument.

#### **Writers Consider Other People**

Teachers and students spend a lot of time feeling each other out, looking for ways to connect. They need to be, as they say in the writing texts, "aware of their audiences."

Having some sense of the teacher as audience, a student is not likely to respond to an essay question with sentences like "Desdemona, she burst fresh out of sight." A teacher, on the other hand, needs to communicate in language that takes into account the values, knowledge and tastes of her students without resorting to quoting from the latest issue of *Sassy* magazine. The writing classroom provides a dicey, if instructive, laboratory for communication that considers others.

The workouts in Part IV present ways for writers to connect with an audience.

#### **Writers Create Choices**

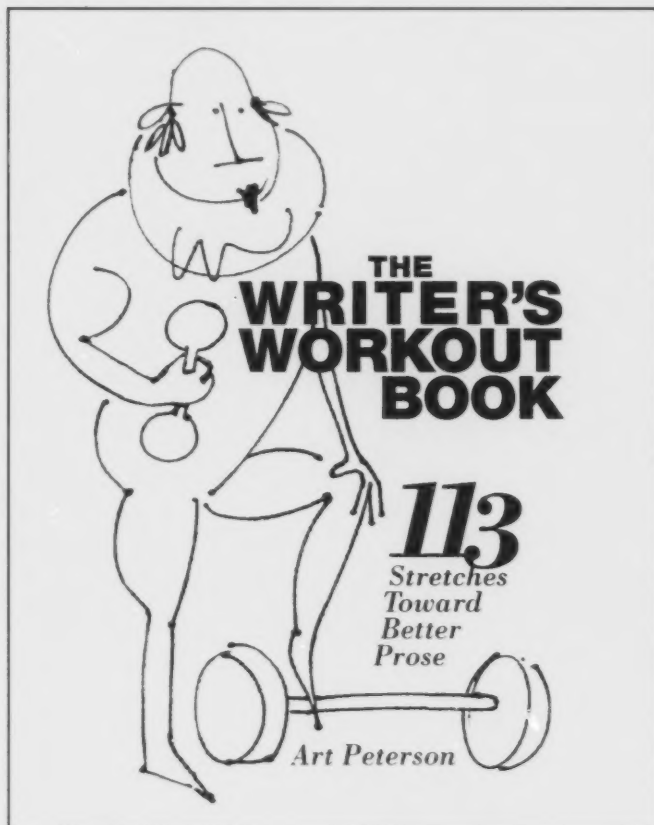
Most students come to writing class reluctant to pursue the possibilities that working writers take for granted. This may be because they have learned to be very nervous about "whoing" when they should been "whoming" and the like. These fears limit their willingness to take chances. I have taught many students who, if they were quarterbacks and I the coach,

would want me to script not just the first ten plays, but the entire game, regardless of what happens on the field.

So even as I am committed to structured learning, I often have quoted Thomas Edison: "There ain't no rules here; we're trying to get something done."

I want students to understand that a command of rhetoric opens up worlds of precise nouns and power verbs, accurate comparisons and imagined scenarios, simple sentences and baroque paragraphs.

I have spent much of my career trying to convince students that just because they are writing for school, they do not have a responsibility to be boring. Yes, I tell the student bogged down in a generic "report" on the Golden Gate Bridge, it's O.K. to tell about how, as a young boy at the bridge's 50th anniversary celebration, he thought he was going to die — crushed to death or drowned — as he was stuck in a gridlock of thousands of older and taller people, inching across the perilously swaying span. Yes, he could do that and also make sure we knew that the bridge was a "sym-



metrical cantilevered suspension," engineered by Joseph Strauss and opened on April 28, 1937.

Another time, a student presented a precise but pedantic analysis of the Matisse painting *Femme Au Chapeau*, one of the jewels in the collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

"So," I asked, "what is it that attracts you to the museum?"

"You meet a better class of men there," she said.

Her next draft kept the analysis but was a lot more interesting.

The workouts in Part V explore the rhetorical choices available to writers.

### Writers Love Words

I'll admit that, to the uninitiated, the little rush of joy that comes over a writer when, in revision, "natty" replaces "neat," may seem an over-refined pleasure, like the thrill the fox hunter feels when the hounds pick up the scent. But as a teacher of writing, my job is to create language addicts, to load students up with words that connote anger or humor, that establish sympathy or sarcasm.

I remember a girl discussing her college essay with me. She was a flute player applying to a prestigious music department. I asked if she played any instruments other than the flute.

"I used to play the ocarina," she said.

We were on to something. In the final draft of her essay, the word "ocarina" turned up at the beginning and at the end. How could an admissions officer resist this artful use of a lovely word? The girl was accepted. Later she wrote to say she was the leader of the only ocarina trio on campus. I wanted to think she wasn't joking.

The workouts in Part VI explore the pleasures and possibilities of words.

### Writers Keep Trying

As we will see, much advice about writing is paradoxical. The chief among these paradoxes may be that writing is both easy and difficult. On the one hand, because we all have language, writing comes natu-

rally. We need only purchase a paisley-covered journal, a pen with the right colored ink, a cup of latte at a commodious cafe and settle down to uncork our personal reservoir of words and thoughts. This isn't me. For me, reading over my deeply-felt first draft is often like waking from a dream in which I have performed lifesaving brain surgery only to realize I don't even know the difference between the cerebrum and the cerebellum.

I have had many students who write with more ease than I do. Still, I have worked to discourage the lackadaisical attitude which E.B. White satirizes in the doggerel: Sing ho, sing hey / He thinks he'd like to write a play / But only at certain times of day.

Natural is a start, but then comes the mixing and distilling, shrinking and expanding, tightening and loosening that is revision.

Unfortunately, when I mount my classroom soapbox preaching the need to keep reworking a piece, I sound rather like *McGuffey's Reader*, circa 1895: Persistence, hard work, self-discipline pay off. The kids start drifting away, more because of my stridency than my sentiment.

Sometimes I find it more effective to merely call attention to a remark by Thomas Mann: "A writer is someone for whom writing is harder than it is for other people."

The workouts in Part VII and elsewhere in this book help make the difficult work of revision, if not exactly fun, at least intellectually diverting.

Finally, a disclaimer to be read as if it were printed in red ink and capital letters: The workouts in this book are inspired by my lessons, but they are not intended to be your lessons. In 30 years I have collected wonderful ideas, large and small from hundreds of teachers, but I have never found an idea that could be transported intact to my classroom. Even my own lesson, fresh off the drawing board for first period, often needs to be rebuilt for second period. All curriculum that works is made in individual classrooms. I present these 113 workouts as a gift for teachers who, like me, are inspired to create by reflecting on specific examples rather than general pronouncements. As they contemplate these teaching "recipes," they will think of themselves not as cooks but as chefs.

# How to Practically Guarantee Poor Student Writing — Without Even Trying

by

DIANE BOEHM



Had enough of good student writing? Like worst-case scenarios? Want to prove that lots of students should never have been admitted to college?

Listen up! It is possible to practically *guarantee* the worst student papers anybody has ever seen, in just ten easy steps:

**1** Accept first drafts. How can you be sure you are getting bona fide first drafts? Easy. Assign writing but do not instruct or monitor writers as they work on the assignment. When the paper is due, collect final products only — no early drafts, no revisions, no in-class preparation exercises, no proposals, no working bibliographies, no source materials, no preliminary outlines. Who wants to carry all that stuff?

**2** Require sworn statements that no one else has read any draft of a student's paper. We all know how helpful feedback on drafts, or conversations about our ideas, can be. Why take a risk? Nip those strategies in the bud!

**3** Assume that the writing process of all students is the same as yours. You always write a detailed three-page outline before drafting any document — why shouldn't they?

**4** Take advantage of students' writing anxiety. Do not waste class time responding to student questions about the writing assignment. Do not present any models of effective papers to allow students to visualize the completed assignment. How are students ever going to learn to be tough if you don't get tough with them?

**5** Circle every error *in red*, but offer no comments. This will remind them of every teacher they've

ever had who told them they were poor writers — and it will clearly demonstrate both your own superior command of language and their hopeless inadequacy.

**6** Do not bother to respond to a student's ideas and efforts. You already know the paper will be inadequate; why bother to take a student's ideas seriously?

**7** If you feel obligated to respond, limit your responses only to the flaws in the paper. You do want to motivate the student to get rid of them, don't you?

**8** Encourage students to use as much jargon and as many seven-syllable words as possible (try *oligocythemia* or *integrodifferential*). How else will they learn to impress their readers?

**9** Structure assignments so students are writing only for you, the teacher. They'll have plenty of time to write for real purposes and real audiences out in the real world!

**10** Require students to write on the topics *you* are interested in; allow no options, encourage no exploration of personally meaningful topics. That's the kind of paper you were assigned in school; why shouldn't they have the same?

There you have it: ten easy, foolproof steps to guarantee poor papers. I suppose it's always possible one or two effective papers might sneak in, no matter how carefully you follow the guidelines. But if you get more than five well-written papers, dinner is on me!

*Diane Boehm is director of the writing program at Saginaw Valley State University in Michigan. She is a teacher consultant with the Minnesota Writing Project.*



# The More Things Change... Or Do They?

Recently, a new book entitled *The Origins of Composition Studies in the American College, 1875-1925: A Documentary History*, edited by John C. Brereton (1995, Pittsburg University Press) arrived at the Quarterly office. This impressive scholarly work records, through source documents, the controversies surrounding the beginnings of college composition courses. At first glance, the book looked a bit daunting, but as we began to read some of the essays that comprise *Origins*, we were surprised at how many of the hotly debated issues surrounding composition instruction one hundred years ago have an eerily contemporary ring.

Here we reprint, with permission, a few selections from *Origins* which illustrate that, in composition instruction, the more things change, the more they stay the same.

Note: Please, no angry letters about the virtual exclusion of girls from the concerns of these writers. That's one thing that has changed.

## The Reading/Writing Debate

*High school students don't write enough. This is the conventional wisdom confirmed by Arthur Applebee's 1984 survey of secondary schools. Ironically, Applebee was telling us nothing new. One hundred years earlier, Charles Francis Adams (grandson of John Quincy Adams) came to the same conclusion after surveying Harvard preparatory schools to determine why Harvard freshman wrote so poorly. He includes in his account one examiner's experience in a preparatory school:*

In the course of the examination of certain schools in the country towns of one of the counties in the immediate vicinity of Boston, the examiner, an official of the State Board of Education, made the usual inquiry of the scholars: "What is the object of the study of English Grammar?" The answer of the scholars was immediate, that it was "the art of reading and writing the English language correctly." The examiner thereupon told the members of the class in question that he wished them, having then studied grammar for several years, to show what the results of their instruction had been by at once sitting down and writing to him an ordinary letter asking for employment — such a letter as they might, and, indeed, certainly would, be called upon to write at some time in subsequent life.

The teacher of the school promptly interfered, stating that the test was of a most unheard-of character, and that, in justice to himself, he objected to having his scholars subjected to it, "They had not been taught in that way!" In other words, the children in this school had been taught to parse, as it is called, and to repeat after the manner of parrots certain rules as to gender, and the subjects and predicates, and to distinguish orally parts of speech. They had never had any practice to enable them to make use of their knowledge; and so they could not compose a letter of the most ordinary character, or, indeed, express a thought in writing. (p.93) ...

To write English correctly and with ease is something not quickly or easily to be acquired. It is a good deal more difficult to acquire than, for instance, a fair degree of proficiency in the games of baseball or lawn tennis, or than riding on bicycle or sailing a boat, or than skating or swimming. Yet nearly every boy from the academy can do some one at least of these things with ease, and a degree of skill calculated to excite admiration. How is this ability acquired? It certainly is not acquired by studying rules in treatises, or by listening to lectures on curves, equilibrium, buoyancy of bodies or science of pitching and batting. The study

of underlying principles is here discarded in favor of practice; and the practice is not at the rate of an hour in a month, or even an hour in two weeks — the mere suggestion of such a thing would excite derisive surprise — but it is daily and incessant. It is only through similar daily and incessant practice that the degree of facility in writing the mother tongue is acquired which alone enables student or adult to use it as a tool in his work — the way in which it ought to be used in the course of a college career. It is there not an end; it is an instrument. (p.95) ...

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***It is only through similar daily and incessant practice that the degree of facility in writing the mother tongue is acquired...***

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*Of course, not everyone agrees that the practice of writing is the single most important component in learning to write. Stephen Krashen and others have argued that reading plays a larger role in a writer's development, a position reminiscent of a point of view heard 100 years ago. This idea is articulated in the following anonymous 1896 article published in Century Magazine. The author questions the concept of learning to write by writing and argues for an education rich in literary models.*

[A] danger which threatens the progress of reform is the supposition, very generally accepted in some high circles, that the pupil, in order to write good English, may profitably neglect literature, if only he steadily write compositions. We are told that the way to become a good writer is to write; this sounds plausible, like many other pretty sayings equally remote from fact. No one thinks that the way to become a good medical practitioner is to practise; that is the method of quacks. The best way, indeed, to become a good writer is to be born of the right sort of parents; this fundamental step having been unaccountably neglected by many children, the instructor has to do what he can with second- or third-class material. Now a wide reader is usually a correct writer; and he has reached the goal in the most delightful manner, without feeling the penalty of Adam. What teacher ever found in his classes a boy who knew his Bible, who enjoyed Shakespeare, and who loved Scott, yet who, with this outfit, wrote illiterate compositions? This

youth writes well principally because he has something to say, for reading maketh a full man; and he knows what correct writing is in the same way that he knows his friends — by intimate acquaintance. (p. 240)

*Charles Francis Adams doesn't agree. Reading great literature is little help to the neophyte writer, he contends:*

The great masters of written expression are no less rare than the great masters of painting or of music — a Milton, an Addison, a Burke or an Emerson would rank in the individuality or choiceness of his work with a Rembrandt, a Titian or a Millet in painting; or a Mozart, a Beethoven or Wagner in music. A school-master, whose business it was to instruct children of from 15 to 18 years of age in the elements of drawing, painting or music, with a view to passing an examination for admittance into some Academy, would naturally devote his time and that of his classes to a severe discipline in the first rudiments of music and draughtsmanship — the practice of the scales and the drawing of straight lines, the flexibility of the muscles, the facility of the fingers and the correctness of ear and eye. But what would be thought of a master who instead of this, exhibited a copy — a good copy, perhaps — of a portrait by Titian or Velasquez, Rubens or Reynolds, or played to his pupils, or took them to hear a composition of Wagner, Mozart or Beethoven — analyzing according to his lights and after his own fashion the masterpieces under consideration, pointing out differences of method and manner, and then, after thus directing the budding intelligence of those who did not yet know really how to draw a line or strike a note and who were not mature enough to have any correct appreciation of what they had seen or heard, should tell them to sit down at their desks and paint a portrait after the manner first of Rembrandt and then of Velasquez, or compose a symphony in the style of Mozart as distinguished from that of Beethoven? Yet, incredible as it seems, this is now done in some of the preparatory schools. (p.121)

**The Student-Centered Classroom circa 1890**

*Nancie Atwell has helped focus the educational debate over the importance of student choice in learning to write. Many school writing assignments, she argues, are merely exercises that do not inspire young writers to their highest potential. Atwell echoes the argument Gertrude Buck articulated in an 1891 Educational Review article promoting authentic writing in the classroom.*

After doing away with the artificial motive for writing, that of exemplifying certain rules of discourse, it became necessary to substitute a real motive. The first that suggested itself was naturally that which impels one to write on any "genuine occasion" — the motive of having something to say which another person wishes or needs to hear. The acceptance of this motive as essential to any normal process of communication both initiated and justified the movements in composition teaching which immediately succeeded it; namely, the derivation of subjects for writing from the student's own experience and the direction of his writing toward a definite audience. Upon subjects remote from his own experience or interests the student had no natural impulse to write. We are often reminded that the average schoolboy has nothing to say to anybody about "Pereunt et imputantur," "The vice of ambition" or "Autumn thoughts." If left to himself, he would never voluntarily write a word on such a subject. Occasion would be wanting, since no observation or thought of his own presses for utterance, nor does any known interest on the part of another person in his ideas (if he had them) call forth their interests which, however trivial they may be in the teacher's eyes, are for him and to his spiritual peers worth communicating. There is a real demand somewhere for the experiences which he is eager to impart. And until this supply and this demand are brought into relations with each other, there can be no genuine writing. ... The teacher's function is that of a middleman in this process of communicating ideas. ... The student should write for a definite audience and upon a subject which interests both this audience and himself. (pp. 243-244)

*Were student response groups invented by educational innovators of the 1960s and 70s, Donald Graves and Donald Murray among them? Maybe not. Buck's 1891 article goes on to emphasize the importance of students responding to one another's writing.*

The genuine occasion for writing, like that for the child's walking, furnishes its own practical standard for criticism. Did I succeed in reproducing my experience exactly in my friend's mind? Did he receive from me the sensation I had previously felt? Did he see each event as it had passed before my eyes? Did he think my thought after me? Did he reach my conclusion as I had earlier reached it? Questions such as these furnish the starting point for all that new order of criticism which is held by its advocates to be both

practically and theoretically consistent with genuine writing. The more objective and impersonal the answers given to these questions, the more likely is the criticism to be vital — the student's judgment of his own writing, not the teacher's externally imposed estimate of it.

Hence the devices of some ingenious teachers for returning directly to the writer, for comparison with the original experience, the experience which he has actually transmitted to the reader's mind. For instance, some outdoor scene is described to a friend skillful with the brush, whereupon he paints for the writer a sketch of that same scene as it flashed before his eyes while reading the description. Or, a fellow student, taking the point of view of the reader addressed, gives back to the writer in other language, and possibly in further detail, a verbal account of the image transmitted to his consciousness. Thus the writer may know of a surety whether or not his communication reached home; and, more than this, often in the process of comparison the source of its failure or success becomes evident. (p. 249)

#### The Correctness/Content Dilemma

*What is the appropriate balance between content and correctness in the writing classroom? Should students spend time completing Daily Oral Language editing exercises or Showing Writing paragraphs? A 1911 Harper's Monthly article by Thomas Raynesford Lounsbury takes a stand on this still-contemporary issue.*

Two themes come up for consideration which though treating of the same subject are marked by a peculiar contrast. One is deformed by errors of various sorts, by the use of locutions which are not permissible in correct speech, by constructions for which the resources of grammar would be tasked in order to find a satisfactory explanation. Yet in spite of these glaring faults the work done is somehow interesting. What is said is said with so much vivacity and occasional felicity that it attracts and holds the attention. Notwithstanding its linguistic lapses, it has fulfilled the first law of writing; it is readable.

The other is correct in the employment of words and in their arrangement. It is everything that it should be from the point of view of grammar and usage. Yet it is somehow so dull that it has upon the reader all the effect of an opiate. Its fairly aggressive tediousness, along with the impossibility of finding particular er-

# The Origins of Composition Studies in the American College, 1875–1925

A DOCUMENTARY HISTORY



rors to cavil at, irritates the critic. Yet what is he to do? If he tells the brutal truth, he must say to the writer: I find no fault with your use of words or with the construction of your sentences or of your paragraphs; but the fact is you have contrived to take every particle of interest out of an interesting subject. Your essay is pervaded by an overpowering dullness which casts a burden upon the spirits beyond the justifiable limits of human endurance.

To this the hapless student may reply: I have given you all the information you asked for. You find no fault with the correctness of the way in which it has been conveyed. What more can I do; what more would you have me do? It is a perfectly just protest against the criticism received. No fair answer can be made to it under the conditions given. For we have reached here an ultimate fact. Nothing more can be said than that one piece with all its blunders is interesting because it is written in an interesting manner; the other, free as it is from grammatical or rhetorical errors, is dull beyond description because something is lacking, the want of which we feel but cannot exactly describe, at least in terms palatable to the writer. The difference between the two pieces is due to the presence in the one and to the absence in the other of a trace of that alchemical power of style which in its perfection can transmute the base matter of common thought and incident into the gold of literary achievement. Manifestly this is something which cannot be imparted by direct instruction. Wherever it comes from, it assuredly does not come from judicious criticism. It gets, indeed, little help from any criticism whether judicious or injudicious. (p. 273)

## The Compulsory Composition Debate

*Disagreement on the subject of compulsory composition began with the onset of such classes in the late 1800s, as Lounsbury illustrates here:*

A university which should set out to make all its students musicians or mathematicians or architects or engineers or painters without taking into consideration their several tastes or capacities will deservedly incur both censure and ridicule. Yet this is exactly what all of them set out to do in the art of composition. Certain persons there are who both before and after graduation have no disposition to write. Why can they not be left undisturbed in this ideally desirable condition of voluntary abstention? The world is not suffering from a penury of manuscripts or of books. Here, therefore, individuality of choice comes properly into play. The elective system has been at times praised, and at times overpraised. Similarly it has been disapproved and undervalued. But if there be warrant for it on the score of reason, it ought to find its fullest and most satisfactory justification in the matter of English composition. Yet this is the one place where it is not tolerated at all. Even the great champion of the system [Charles Eliot], who advocated the utmost liberty of choice in about everything else, drew the line here. He, too, insisted that upon this particular educational altar every student should be immolated as a victim. (p.282) ...

On the subject of required English composition, I am a stout, unabashed, and thorough skeptic. And although the majority is still against me, I am in good company. Professor Child read and corrected themes at Harvard for about forty years: at the end of the time,



it was his fervent belief that not only was the work unprocurable to the student, but that in many cases it was injurious. That it is always injurious to the instructor, when it is intemperately indulged, is certain. When I was an instructor at Harvard, I one day met Professor Child in the yard. He stopped a moment and asked me what kind of work I was doing. I said, "Reading themes." He put his hand affectionately on my shoulder, and remarked with that wonderful smile of his, in which kindness was mingled with the regret of forty years, "Don't spoil your youth."

### **The Frustrations of Teaching Composition**

*Writing teachers boxed into traditional composition teaching often grumble about the "paper load," grading mountains of compulsory student essays on topics that the students did not choose and know very little about. A 1912 article by William Lyons Phelps colorfully describes his frustrating experience teaching college composition:*

After spending a year in graduate study at Harvard, I was appointed by President Eliot Instructor in English, an honour of which I have always been proud. I observed a curious fact. Men who had been graduated from Harvard, had studied in the graduate school, had topped this by some years of research in Europe were spending nine-tenths of their time doing what? Reading undergraduate required themes and correcting in red ink spelling, punctuation, and paragraphing. Why such mighty labour of preparation to perform work that could be done exactly as well by any young school-teacher? Some of the instructors were permitted to give one hour a week of teaching in English Literature, others did nothing but read themes. I read and marked over seven hundred themes a week — most of them were short themes, but some were not. Whenever I entered my room I was greeted by the huge pile of themes on the table, awaiting my attention. I read very few books the whole year — there was no time. I never went to bed before midnight. If I were sick for two or three days, a substitute had to be found, for it was only by steady daily reading that I could keep pace with the manuscripts pouring in like flood, threatening to engulf me every day. ...

But [for] the highest respect and admiration for my colleagues, nothing on earth would have induced me to continue such brain-fogging toil another year. I do not know that I should have been invited to do so, for I accepted another situation without asking. The curious thing is, that I then believed in the efficacy of the

system. I said to myself: "This is worse than coal-heaving. This is nerve-destroying, a torture to soul and body. But it is necessary. Someone must do it. Why not I? But not I, any longer." (Phelps, p. 287)

*Lounsbury's 1911 Harper's Monthly article expresses similar sentiments:*

Under the compulsory system now prevailing the task of reading and correcting themes is one of deadly dullness. Men who are really fitted to perform the work properly are exceedingly rare; and when found they will not persist in carrying on this most distasteful of occupations, unless compelled by necessity. It is consequently looked upon as merely stepping-stone to something else.

We are indeed frequently assured by those who have been themselves careful never to try this sort of work that the state of mind just indicated is all wrong; that the reading and correcting of themes is one of noblest occupations to which the human mind can devote itself. Occasionally men of letters have been found to express themselves as pained and shocked that the land does not swarm with instructors who burning with eagerness to lead young and growing minds into the paths of pure and lofty expression, which these callow youth are supposed to be anxious to tread. Nothing more delightful could well be conceived than to round up this whole body of sorrowing souls and compel each and every one of them to prepare upon short notice essays upon subjects which they know nothing about and in which they have not the slightest interest; for this is the very thing which our institutions of learning are persistently asking, not of trained writers who presumably possess some ideas of their own, but of raw and immature minds which are supplied with little knowledge and are but slightly addicted to reflection. These literary extollers of our present methods would rise up from the experiment wiser men, and probably a good deal sadder. (p.270)

*Contemplating the contemporary flavor of these excerpts, we too are a little wiser and sadder.*



# The Tattlers' Tales:

## Some Authentic Writing from Six-Year-Olds



Opinion is divided on the subject of the first grade tattle box. Some, usually those who by choice or circumstance maintain an Olympian distance from six-year-olds, find questionable the very idea of a container provided for the sole purpose of allowing children to fink on their neighbors. Proficient snitching, they argue, should not be an educational objective, now or ever.

Others, usually parents and teachers who live closer to the emerging bathroom humor and junk food jingles which are the six-year-old life style, take a more nuanced position. Tattling, they say, is a maturation thing, one of the characteristics of being somewhere between three and eight years old. If you can't beat 'em, they reason, at least nudge 'em toward some positive results.

The tattle box gives first graders a chance to practice their emergent writing on a topic that really matters to them—how they have been wronged and by whom. Further, the tattle box provides an acculturating lesson: When cool people are hurt, insulted or otherwise offended, they don't hit; they write. These tattles were collected from the classroom of Mrs. D. and Mrs. G. who have withheld their names to protect the guilty.

Dear Mrs. D Jeff Matt H.  
and Aron ~~was~~ <sup>been</sup> running  
around the room.  
Love Farneosh

COULDEEN  
COULDE ME  
STOPPED  
HEAD  
SOPHIE OM

ken pocket  
me in the <sup>Hand</sup>  
back wit a pensl

Ken kix me  
in line  
man

Jeffre said  
a bad wrd  
Hannah

Andre.  
called me sm + de  
Pats.  
From Gophle

Dear Mrs G  
Matt B. was  
tbat he was  
pretending  
that he was  
died

Molly lifed up her  
shirt.  
Samantha N.

Blake  
braxed His  
Pensei

# Literacy and Numeracy in a Changing Workplace

by

MARK JURY AND MIRA KATZ

*Educators are increasingly challenged to provide students with the skills they will need in the workplace. However, much of the research designed to determine what those skills are has been done from a distance, through surveys and quick tours of workplaces rather than close observation of work. Here Mark Jury and Mira Katz, doctoral students in Education in Language and Literacy at U. C. Berkeley, take a close look at literacy practices within a high tech, multicultural workplace. They call into question the popular characterization of workers as "deficient" and needing a dose of "basic skills." Their work is part of an ongoing study comparing literacy practices in a traditionally organized and a more "high-performance" workplace. The project is directed by Dr. Glynda Hull, a researcher for the National Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy and a leader in the field of workplace literacy issues.*



Not long ago, browsing through messages on one of the many on-line discussions of education and work, we ran across the following lament from the owner of a small management consulting firm:

*My clients have employees that can't read, write, reason and complete the most basic math functions. ... School systems have not and are not doing their jobs. It is as simple as that. The young people today are not prepared for the challenges of today let alone tomorrow. We are in serious trouble in this country. We are losing our manufacturing base and it will only get worse.*

The consultant's concerns certainly are not new. They echo a decade—some would say a century—of reports by government commissions on the skills of the current and future workforce. In particular, as the number of women, people of color and immigrants entering the workforce has increased, so have comments about "skills deficits" and a lack of workforce preparedness. Of course, we're in no position to question the experience of the consultant or his clients. We would, however, like to offer an alternative view which has grown out of nearly three years of observations in two large, high tech, multicultural workplaces undergoing organizational change. We want to present a close look at some

of the literate practices in one of these workplaces, hoping to challenge popular assumptions about workers and about the skills they are said to need. Perhaps this in turn might challenge parallel assumptions about the changing populations in American schools.

First, a little background on the study. Our research began in the context of widespread concerns, like those of this consultant: U.S. workers are ill-equipped to compete in the global marketplace. The claim was that in order to be competitive, American industries had to adopt new technologies and new forms of work organization labeled "high performance."

The time had come, it was said, to throw out the "Tayloristic model," the form of work organization developed by the American engineer F.W. Taylor about 90 years ago. Taylor presented an industrial configuration in which workers were trained to perform simple repetitive tasks. It was presumed that when the model was working as it should, workers would check their minds at the door and leave the thinking to engineers and managers. By contrast, the high performance model is one which, at least in theory, gives responsibility to the workers who then become active participants in work-related decisions.

Critics say that if the high performance model is the goal, schools must help students develop knowledge and skills necessary for success in restructured, technologically sophisticated workplaces.

Many large companies have adopted some of the trappings of "high performance," but in piecemeal fashion, leaving the organization of the workplace and the daily lives of the workers largely unaffected. The rarity, however, is the company which genuinely attempts to rethink itself, to change its workplace culture, to reorganize in ways that affect all employees' work practices and skill requirements. We'll focus here on one such company.

This company, which we'll call "Teamco," contracts to manufacture circuit board assemblies, the fastest growing and one of the most competitive branches of the electronics industry. Teamco is headquartered in California's Silicon Valley and has plants worldwide. The workplace is multicultural — the majority of workers are Chinese, Vietnamese or Filipino, although many other ethnicities are present. Some of the workers have completed only a bit of elementary school, while others have advanced degrees. Since most have never been to an American elementary or secondary school, this article should not be interpreted as a comment on whether or not American school systems are "doing their job." Rather, we want to understand how this company's shift toward a high performance workplace is changing the kinds and uses of literacy, numeracy and oral communications skills that production workers need to function successfully at work.

Because Teamco's reorganization involved a substantial increase in the kinds of reading and writing workers engaged in, we had the opportunity to compare supervisors' assumptions about workers' literate skills and knowledge with what workers actually did. This comparison confirmed for us the need to analyze literacy skills in relation to the contexts in which they occur. Work is never simply a set of tasks; it is also a set of social relationships from which tasks cannot be disentangled. Our research also calls into question the notion, seen so often in the various skills lists which accompany commission reports, of literacy as a set of "basic skills" — which tends to reduce reading and writing to discrete and isolated tasks. Our work emphasizes instead the contextual nature of literacy practices in both school and the workplace.

In the next two sections, we describe portions of two events: first, a Self-Directed Work Team (SDWT) meeting, then an overview of a goal review process. We offer these two events to provide a glimpse of the degree to which literacy practices pervade the organization of work in this electronics factory.

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*Many large companies have adopted some of the trappings of "high performance," but in piecemeal fashion, leaving the organization of the workplace and the daily lives of the workers largely unaffected.*

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#### **A Self-Directed Work Team Meeting**

On a Wednesday afternoon in mid-April, a group of 23 workers clad in white, knee-length company jackets, all members of the Final Mechanical Quality Assurance Team (Team 21), push into a cramped conference area on the factory floor for the team meeting. In a tiny space consisting of several five-foot-high moveable cubicle walls, some workers are seated at an oblong table, but many must stand. As team members arrive, each one picks up a copy of the meeting minutes and the agenda stacked on the table nearest the entry. While they wait for the meeting to convene, workers quietly peruse the two-page document. Team 21 supervisor Rachel Solarzano, a thirtyish European American who has worked at Teamco just over two years, makes notes about issues that need to be taken up with the group. When all members of the team are present, Rachel asks QA team leader April Nguyen, a petite, shy Vietnamese woman with graying hair, to read aloud the previous week's minutes and this week's agenda. Team members follow along.

Next, three members of the Final Mechanical/Final QA (which includes five production lines) report on problems in their respective areas.

In English heavily influenced by his Japanese roots, Toshio Kogawa animatedly describes difficulties with boards coming from another line — Second Handload. Toshio and his coworkers are receiving boards with a tilted component, which is problematic because it conflicts with the protocol outlined in a complex

written document known as the MPI (Manufacturing Process Instructions). The MPI indicates that the component must be soldered flush with the board, which Toshio reports is often not the case — a problem which warrants the team's collective attention.

The following excerpt of Rachel and Toshio's conversation is typical of the manner in which problems are presented at Team 21 meetings and provides a sense of the exchanges that occur between this team supervisor and the line workers. The latched, overlapped nature of the dialogue reflects the relaxed feel of the meetings, and the exchange also gives some indication of the significant kinds of language learning opportunities that occur regularly in the Teamco context. Below, latched turns (where no break occurred between two speakers' utterances) are marked by two equal signs, and overlapped turns (where speakers talk simultaneously) are indicated by brackets. Capital X's mark inaudible syllables.

Toshio: *Eh, we got problem on uh 606? Eh? So Second Handload they got push their ICs up. They're connected here (motioning with his hands). The XXX by the middle push down the part.*

Rachel: *Okay so what you're saying is [the ICs]*

Toshio: *[XX this way. Yeah.]*

Rachel: *== are tilted? ==*

Toshio: *==Yeah. Still high==*

Rachel: *==So the leads weren't flush [into the board?]*

Toshio: *[yeah]*

The dialogue continues in this vein.

Through Rachel and Toshio's lively exchange, peppered with hand gestures which mimic the physical relationship of the component to the board, the two come to a clear understanding of what the problem is. Rachel thanks Toshio for bringing it to her attention, and she promises to look into it.

Next, Binh Tran, a young soft-spoken Vietnamese worker on the Final Mechanical line, gives an account of difficulties in his area. As he does so, he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a piece of paper from which



he reads for the duration of his presentation. The group listens attentively while Binh lists the difficulties he is aware of while Carlotta Bonilla, a Filipina in her early twenties, takes notes. When Binh finishes, several members of the group applaud his thorough account.

Jorge Garcia, a middle-aged Mexican American worker from Final Mechanical, also reports on problems. He informs the team that his line is getting boards with loose or missing nuts and washers. Rachel asks if either he or the lead from his area is communicating verbally or in writing about this issue with the First Mechanical line, whose work precedes that of Final Mechanical. When repeated problems such as this one occur, often a written report called a Corrective Action form is filled out to document problems between production lines.

Following these reports, Dolores Aguilar, a health and safety inspector of Mexican American descent, reads the CSI (Customer Satisfaction Index) report to



the group. The report, which comes weekly from Teamco's customers, "grades" the company on quality, communication and delivery. Today, as usual, the grades are mostly A's and some B's.

It is now Rachel's turn. She reiterates her expectation that all team members will be at team meetings on time, and she commends the team for their hard work and discipline. She asks if everyone is using the Total Quality Management (TQM) forms passed out at the last meeting, and Dolores suggests that they spend some time discussing TQM. Rachel explains that the five team leads on Team 21 are supposed to fill out the forms indicating quality problems when they arise. The new forms of tracking that TQM requires mark an increase in the literate responsibilities of workers that has occurred recently with the company's shift to Self-Directed Work Teams.

As the meeting comes to a close, Final Mechanical lead Joyce Castro, a Filipina in her late forties who taught first grade for 20 years in the Philippines before coming to the United States, has some advice for her fellow workers. She tells the team that workers who find themselves with nothing to do should contact one of the team leads who will find a job that needs doing. "So you have to tell us you have nothing to do. [Say to them,] 'Give me a job. You got a job for me?' 'Don't just go home and say there's nothing to do.'" Rachel is surprised that some workers leave early. She says that the worst thing is to clock out without being paid for the full eight hours. Even if it means doing paper work in her office, she says, there is always something which needs to be done.

Finally, Rachel reminds people that although Team 21 is divided into five lines, each serving a different customer, that technically everyone should be able to work anywhere in the Team 21 area. She urges those who want to cross-train for another line to speak with her, reminding the group that the building supervisor "totally backs cross training." She adds, "It's gonna happen anyway. The more you learn, the better off you are to the company."

The meeting described here is typical of Team 21's weekly meetings in its uses of literacy, its opportunities for language learning and its emphasis on problem solving. Although over 90% of Teamco's workforce is comprised of nonnative speakers of English, reading, writing and problem solving in English are an

important part of what workers do every day. They read and write meeting minutes and agendas; they receive important information from both customers as well as from internal sources about their team performance. Out on the work floor they must refer to the Manufacturing Process Instructions for a wide range of different boards made by the company, and they must also document defects as a means of tracking their quality and productivity, using data they collect to keep a running tab of team performance on a weekly basis. Workers order parts from the stockroom by filling out order forms, and they keep track of how many and what kinds of boards are finished by their line. Some track inventory on the computer, entering data which will be used by the team and the managers to calculate goals. Clearly, these workers employ daily a wide range of literacy skills.

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***The accounts of Toshio, Binh, and Jorge demonstrate how important the ability to identify problems is to this factory's work process. Such problem solving is an integral part of Teamco employees' daily work life.***

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Since so many of the workers speak English as a second language, interactions occurring in English, whether spoken or written, present an opportunity for language learning. Toshio and Rachel's exchange, in which talk and gesture are co-mingled, typifies the kind of linguistic assistance and opportunities for increasing language skills available to employees everyday. Because the workforce represents such a variety of cultures and languages (the company estimates that collectively its employees speak over 18 languages or dialects), English is the common workplace language. While workers of similar backgrounds converse and write notes to themselves and one another in their native languages, they are not only able but are obligated to function in English for cross-team and cross-area communication.

In addition to being a literacy-rich and linguistically-rich environment, Teamco is also a place where workers must solve problems in a variety of ways. The

accounts of Toshio, Binh, and Jorge demonstrate how important the ability to identify problems is to this factory's work process. Such problem solving is an integral part of Teamco employees' daily work life. Negotiation among team members and across teams is essential to Teamco's success, and line workers must be able to reconcile differences between the boards they receive on the floor and the complex written instructions (the MPI's and other documents) that are so central to Teamco's work organization. Doing what the job requires is not always simple, and making reality (boards, for example) conform to the required written specifications takes an enormous amount of ingenuity as well as an informed appreciation of the problem.

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***Although front line workers are invited to take on more responsibility, which requires them to make use of extended literate and critical thinking skills, the traditional hierarchy which shuts workers out of the authoritative loops of power within the factory's work processes is largely maintained.***

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However, at the same time that there is considerable effort to involve production line workers in the problem solving processes of the workplace — processes in which literate practices are heavily embedded — there are also constraints on the ways in which workers can participate in such activities. This is illustrated on Team 21 by the fact that while Toshio, Binh, and Jorge are sincerely appreciated for bringing problems to their supervisor's attention, they are not in positions to solve the problems they perceive but must instead rely on their leads and supervisor to consult with other lines within the factory. In this sense, although front line workers are invited to take on more responsibility which requires them to make use of extended literate and critical thinking skills, the traditional hierarchy which shuts workers out of the authoritative loops of power within the factory's work processes is largely maintained.

### **The Goal Setting Process**

On another occasion in April, two dozen white-smocked workers gather for a Goal Review Board meeting in the Ivory Room, a square meeting and training room off the production floor next to cubicles of buyers and marketers. Made up of production workers and supervisors representing the plant's eight functional areas, the Review Board has asked team representatives to share their quarterly goals for productivity and quality, to present data showing progress toward those goals, and to explain how they measure that progress using productivity and quality calculations.

The board members and presenters sit at three rows of tables facing a whiteboard, overhead projector and projection screen. On the wall to their right is a company poster highlighting "The Five Basic Principles Of Teamwork."

Joanne Peterson, a quality engineer and facilitator of this meeting, has asked Mateo Bulosan, an industrial engineer, to start the meeting by explaining "standard time" — the time a particular work process is expected to take. Workers have been asking who sets this standard time and for what purpose. Bulosan addresses these questions and explains how standard time is used in calculating a team's daily productivity. As he speaks and writes examples on the board, some of the workers pull calculators out of their smock pockets and check his calculations. Others jot notes, read over forms, look at the screen, back at their notes, and then confer with each other. Some appear to pay little or no attention and instead try to finish the overheads for the presentations they will make later in the meeting.

Following Mateo's explanations and an extended question and answer period, Xheng Qian is called as the first team representative to present. A high school geometry teacher in China for 14 years before immigrating to the United States in 1983, Xheng has been working for Teamco since 1986. She started at First Mechanical screwing brackets to boards, snapping on components, and sticking on bar code labels. Currently she is the team leader in the setup area for the SMT (surface mount technology) lines. She and her coworkers load "feeders" with tiny resistors and capacitors.

Though recently recommended for promotion to swing shift supervisor for the SMT area, Xheng turned down

the offer, telling her supervisor that she didn't think her English was good enough. While she feels her English is fine for her current work, she's afraid that as supervisor she will have to speak with customers and doesn't feel confident enough for that. She did tell the supervisor, however, that if he were to recommend her again when the next opportunity came up, she would be ready.

Standing at the front of the room and reading from the overheads she has prepared, Xheng summarizes her team's data collection process and their quality and productivity calculations. She is aware that the company wants teams to measure their quality in terms of parts per million (PPM) — that is, a weekly average of the number of defects or rejects per million units. In her area, each loaded feeder is a unit, while in other areas each part placed on a board is a unit. The fact that the units measured are so different puts her team at an unfair disadvantage. Xheng knows that in an area where workers place thousands of components on boards each night, the average number of defects per week might be only 50 PPM, significantly lower than in her area where they load only a few hundred feeders each night. She is concerned that her area will look bad if forced to use PPM as a measure of quality. This concern is heightened by a new policy linking quarterly bonuses to the team's performance against their goal, and by the new practice of displaying printouts of quality and productivity charts on the wall by the time clock in the busy hallway between the manufacturing floor and the cafeteria.

Before presenting her quality data, she argues for a different measure for her area, preferring to record the percentage of feeders loaded without rejects:

*Xheng: The quality, I think the self-feeder we cannot use the PPM. Ah, we use the percentage is better. Because ah, okay, example [She walks over to the whiteboard and picks up a felt pen.] Every day the average four hundred feeder*



*we set up. If one reject, if use PPM. [She pauses to write the following on the board.]*

$$\begin{aligned} \text{PPM: } 1/400 &= X/1,000,000 \\ X &= 2500 \text{ PPM} \end{aligned}$$

*Four hundred, four hundred feeder, one reject, we get a two thousand five hundred PPM. Very bad quality, right?*

*Joanne: Oh, but you don't have to worry about the number.*

*Xheng: [She writes "%" on the board and then continues.] If use percent that's better, I thinking. Okay ah, one reject, four hundred feeder, right? By hundred percent we can get ninety-nine point seven five. [As she talks, she writes the following equation on the board]:*

$$\%: (1-1/400) \times 100\% = 99.75\%$$

*Very good quality [laughs]. Right? Yeah. We use percent, better. Okay. That's what I think.*

Joanne tells Xheng that she need not worry about the specific number of defects, but that her team should focus on the team's quality trend. Besides, she tells Xheng, her team doesn't have much choice since the

company's database is set up to record PPM as the measure of quality. And again, because that is what the company database is set up to record and print out, that is what is displayed on the quality/productivity charts. Her team's charts, tacked up in the busiest area in the plant, appear to show quality defects at a rate five times the average of the rest of the teams.

As it turns out, Joanne's suggestion to Xheng that "you don't have to worry about the number" proves a bit naive, for in a site-wide goal review meeting later that quarter, the company executive overseeing development of SDWTs tells the site coordinators that teams must revise goals he has assessed as "too low." Xheng's team is among those required to revise their goals. Justifying his assessment of the goals, the manager has noted on the goal sheet, "no evidence of progress."

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***Xheng's situation suggests that workers need not only to be able to collect data and plug it into formulae to calculate earned hours and actual hours and parts per million, but to know what a team's numbers mean in relation to those of other teams, and to know how these numbers will be interpreted, by whom and toward what end.***

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Xheng, then, has sensed correctly that a number like 2500 PPM will not play well to management. It appears high compared to the numbers of other groups. And yet it does, after all, represent a 99.75 percent defect-free process, a difficult performance to improve upon. Xheng calls on Joanne who in turn calls on Dean Kamimura. Not only is Dean familiar with Xheng's team (he was Xheng's supervisor at the time she was recommended for promotion), he is also familiar with the goal approval process, having sat in on the manager's goal assessment meeting. Beyond that, he has a penchant for statistics.

Together Dean and Joanne help Xheng and her team plan a new approach. First they rethink what the team is counting as defects. At the same time, they devise

some creative ways to enlarge her denominator a bit, thereby enabling her team to get its PPM goal down from 2500 to 500. The team's fourth quarter goal is submitted and approved. Over the course of the fourth quarter, the team exceeds its goal, averaging 284.6 PPM. When time comes for her team to submit its first quarter goal for the new year, Xheng again works with Dean. This time they write up an analysis (in the small space provided at the bottom of the standardized goal form) explaining why the new goal is essentially the same as the previous quarter's goal. The final analysis reads:

*Due to the nature of PPM Calculation and infrequency of occurrence (sic) of reported defects, and low denominator (Quantity of feeders setup) each occurrence of a defect is above 3 standard deviations above the average, and exceeds UCL [upper control limit]. This creates instability in the data. Our goal will be 275 PPM ave. week (Best 10 out of 13 weeks) which is 45% lower than Q4-95 Goal.*

In this analysis Dean and Xheng opt to highlight the significant difference between the two goals rather than the difference between past performance and the new goal. The goal is approved.

Admittedly, the complicated calculations that Xheng and her colleagues engage in here are not every day practice at TEAMCO. More typically, the calculations Teamco workers are asked to perform at the end of each shift often involve little more than simple tallying of assemblies or components or defects, tallying which yields numbers to fill in blanks on forms handed over to supervisors. Lead workers are required to do some multiplication and division according to the company's formulae to determine productivity and quality data. But as Xheng's foray into the Teamco world of mandatory goal-setting suggests, this simple tallying and filling in of blanks are only a small part of the numerate practices in this workplace. These practices require an analysis of the settings in which the calculations are embedded and an understanding of how they are inextricably linked with particular literate practices within the company.

Xheng's situation suggests that workers need to be able not only to collect data and plug it into formulae to calculate earned hours and actual hours and parts per million, but also to know what a team's numbers mean in relation to those of other teams, and to know



how these numbers will be interpreted, by whom and toward what end. Even further, Xheng shows the importance of workers knowing alternative formulae and understanding various uses of calculations. Her argument depends on her knowledge of how to present data orally and in writing, and how to make a case with numbers.

In preparing a goal which accurately and fairly represents a complex work process to managers and others removed from the day-to-day operations on the floor, Xheng and Dean demonstrate the importance of being able to work with the simplified, standardized forms and the systems of measure imposed on them by the company. This has gained particular importance since team bonuses are based on performance against a company-approved goal, and management expects "evidence of progress" from quarter to quarter.

#### Discussion

A few things bear comment in closing. First, a caution against some of the popular notions about teams and the changing workplace. There is much vague, romantic talk about workers "thinking for a living" and being "empowered" through teams. And in some ways we have contributed to that talk by choosing in this article to focus on Team 21 and Xheng. While it's true that Teamco's efforts to reorganize have involved some employees working in new and different ways, Teamco is no worker's utopia.

In this new workplace, workers are invited to take on more responsibilities, many of which are embedded in literate practices, without being offered any real shift in the ability to shape their work environment. In fact, it is our sense that the workers' new literate responsibilities at Teamco have increased both their accountability and the degree to which their work is monitored by managers and supervisors. In sum, the invitation to "think critically" and be "empowered" has been accompanied by a degree of micro-management that many workers find stifling, if not also antithetical to the team process.

As the stories of Toshio and Xheng suggest, people negotiate work in creative ways. Contrary to the conventional wisdom which presumes that workers don't currently "think for a living," we have observed both critical and creative thinking at Teamco. Some of this is recognized and rewarded by management, but

much of it is an unacknowledged part of the daily operation of the plant.

We have observed workers of a wide range of ages and from varied cultural, educational, technical and professional backgrounds draw on multiple forms of representation — talk, mimings, drawings, demonstrations, models, mathematical calculations, written documents — to get work done on schedule and with a high degree of quality. We have also, however, observed problems on the production line: conflicts, mistakes, and miscommunication. We have seen blunders of all kinds — including blunders by engineers, supervisors and managers, which entry level workers, when allowed, are left to correct or to circumvent. Nonetheless, we object to the indiscriminate negative characterizations of workers reflected in much research on the workplace and in the popular discourse about work and workers' skills and knowledge.

What does any of this have to say to schools? At a time when some school-to-work initiatives focus their efforts on constructing industry skills standards and linking them to school curricula, it might be tempting to extract from Xheng's goal setting experience, for instance, a tidy little student learning objective: "Given a formula for calculating quality and productivity, the student will be able to gather data, plug appropriate numbers into the formula, and record the products on the worksheet." But this grossly understates what's involved in Xheng's analysis of and solution to the problem, a solution which included extensive collaboration.

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*More important than any static  
set of skills are schools and  
workplaces which honor  
negotiating, [and] which  
nurture multiple perspectives...*

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What we regard as "basic" needs to be questioned. What's "basic" in Xheng's instance has much to do with her ability to read the organization, to understand the power of numbers, to negotiate the company's social network, and, in doing so, to shape a collective resource that helps her act upon a certain problem in a certain context. Her facility with particular mathematical functions helps shape and at times direct that collective



resource, but that facility by itself was not enough to get her team's goal accepted. Nor should we overlook her "basic" understanding that "get the goal accepted" is another way of saying "get management to acknowledge the level of quality and productivity her team has already achieved and maintained."

Team 21's example suggests something other than the currently popular approach to teaching "workplace skills"—that is, teaching discrete units in Effective Listening, Reading for Information, Locating Information, and so on. What's essential for Toshio, especially in this text-saturated workplace, is not simply knowing how to read manufacturing process instructions but also knowing when and how to negotiate around documentation to get work done.

The multiple demands of workplaces such as Teamco—high-tech, multi-ethnic workplaces in rapidly shift-

ing markets—do not call for a static set of "basic skills," but rather for ways of finding common ground. As educators, we must look beyond a basic skills approach to curriculum design and keep ever present in our minds the understanding that literacy practices are part and parcel of social networks. We must recognize that such practices traverse the complex and sometimes contradictory agendas of managers and workers, just as they do those of teachers and students in schools. More important than any static set of skills are schools and workplaces which honor negotiating, nurture multiple perspectives and accommodate multiple forms of representations—schools and workplaces which grant students and workers the authority to draw on their own experiences and add their perspectives to decision-making processes.

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## Case Studies

*continued from page 2*

story of a rocket with stars and the moon), the boy would not share his story with anyone else because "tenia verguenza" (he was embarrassed). Salvador recognized the strengths of his first grade mentee and wrote about the little boy's ability to "make good letters." He urged Salvador to share "su oracion" (his sentence) and this time the boy was willing to do so.

And finally, I noticed as I reviewed my students' field notes that the greatest pleasure these third graders took away from their experience was the same satisfaction that has made teaching a rewarding occupation for countless others: the joy in watching another person grow. Even though the third graders spent a limited time in the first grade classroom, the younger students' progress was sometimes very rapid. At one

point Irma notes, "Los ninos supieron más que el lunes porque les dimos mucha ayuda el lunes y aller..." (The children knew more than Monday and yesterday because we gave them a lot of help). Whatever sense of accomplishment and understanding these young teachers felt as a result of their work could only have been enhanced in their roles as teacher researchers.

*Editors' Note: We do not correct student spellings in English or in Spanish.*

*Janet Kiddoo is Title I Coordinator at Vena Elementary School, Arleta, CA, where she has also taught a third grade bilingual class. This article appeared in another form in the Winter, 1996 issue of the Center X Quarterly published by the UCLA School of Education.*

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# Books

## OTHER PEOPLE'S CHILDREN: CULTURAL CONFLICT IN THE CLASSROOM

by Lisa Delpit

New York: Free Press, 1995

Reviewed by

JOSEPH CHECK

*Joseph Check is director of the Boston Writing Project and teaches at the Institute for Learning and Teaching at the University of Massachusetts.*

Let me begin by telling you a little about the Boston Public Schools, where I have worked closely with teachers, administrators, and parents since 1979. There are 64,000 students, and 80% of them are African-American, Hispanic, Asian, or Caribbean. Bilingual programs are offered in ten languages — Cambodian, Cape Verdean, Chinese, Greek, Haitian Creole, Laotian, Portuguese, Somali, Spanish, and Vietnamese. Last year, an initiative was launched to work with the increasing number of new arrivals who have no literacy in any language— refugees from famine and civil war in Somalia, children who grew up in the camps in Laos and Cambodia, Haitian children who had no opportunity to attend school where they were born. Family dislocation and poverty have an increasing impact on schooling: 20% of white children, 33% of black children, and 75% of Hispanic children in Boston live below the poverty line.

In contrast to the student population of the Boston schools, almost 60% of the city's overall population is white, and the teaching force is largely white, English-speaking, and middle class. Most non-white teachers are African-American, and they routinely teach classes made up of Hispanic, Haitian, and Asian children. Interactions across racial, linguistic, cultural and class lines are the daily stuff of teaching and learning. In this respect, Boston is

no different than many small or large city school systems in the United States; significant differences between those teaching and those taught are increasingly appearing in suburban and rural systems as well. More and more, our schools are places where teachers and students are unlike in important ways, places where teachers educate "other people's children."

At the same time, as one of the wisest educators I know is fond of reminding me, "Parents send us their best children every day. They don't have another set that they're keeping at home." And teachers and administrators, working harder than ever before, longer than ever before, are in the vast majority professional, caring, and of good will. For me, these are the educational realities that Lisa Delpit is addressing in *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*.

The volume collects between a single set of covers nine of Delpit's essays and book chapters dealing with various aspects of cultural diversity in education, making easily available important work published between 1986 and 1993. Delpit has added a brief but pointed overall introduction and short prefaces to each of the book's three sections: "Controversies Revisited," "Lessons From Home and Abroad," and "Looking to the Future."

In these essays Delpit attempts to crystallize and respond to a basic realization concerning sources of cultural conflict in the classroom: "We all carry worlds in our heads, and those worlds are decidedly different. We educators set out to teach, but how can we reach the worlds of others when we don't even know they exist? Indeed, many of us don't even realize that our own worlds exist only in our heads and in the cultural institutions we have built to support them." Behind this realization is an urgent question — "What are we really doing to better educate poor children and children of color?" — and Delpit's response, which suggests a new definition of "the basics" and raises hard questions for current school reform efforts:

*What should we be doing? The answers, I believe, lie not in a proliferation of new reform programs but in some basic understandings of who we are and how we are connected to and disconnected from one another. I have come to some of those understandings through my own attempts to understand my place in this country as an African-American woman: I am the offspring of a teacher in a colored high school in pre-integration Louisiana and a man who received his GED diploma in his fortieth year, only to die of kidney failure at the age of forty-seven because the "colored ward" was not permitted to use the dialysis machine. I am the frightened teenager who was part of the first wave of black students to integrate hostile white high schools... I am the panicked mother of a five-year old soon to enter an urban public school system . . .*

The book begins with three essays which Delpit labels "Controversies Revisited." Many readers already familiar with her work will immediately recognize two essays from the 1980's which caused extensive debate, particularly in language arts/English circles. These are "Skills and Other Dilemmas of a Progressive Black Educator" and "The Silenced Dialogue." According to Delpit, "These two articles, considered as a set, are among the twenty articles that received the most requests for reprints in the history of the Harvard Educational Review. Even though they were published in 1986 and 1988, the controversies surrounding them continue."

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***More and more, our schools are places where teachers and students are unlike in important ways, places where teachers educate "other people's children."***

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"Skills and Other Dilemmas ..." was an attempt to "lay out my concerns with the writing project movement and to detail the frustrations many teachers of color felt at being excluded from educational dialogue — in this case, the dialogue about literacy instruction." When it appeared, she was "unprepared for the intense interest and controversy it generated. Writing project members across the country were incensed. Despite my attempts to say that we must not abandon the

very good ideas of the process approach, but must be open to modification based on the voices of parents and educators of color, they perceived me as unequivocally attacking their work. Many African Americans, on the other hand, told me I had made public beliefs they thought no one else shared. . . ." The third article in this section, "Language Diversity and Learning," is an intentional and successful effort by Delpit to put forward a less emotionally charged version of her views in this area, to "make explicit the balance I actually advocate." She feels it necessary to do so because:

*Explicitly stated in both earlier articles is the caveat that neither position — neither skills nor process, liberal nor conservative — is sufficient in and of itself, yet many educators insist on dichotomizing my ideas, making me a proponent or detractor of one or another perspective. . . I do not demand, as one white academic said, that children of color give up what they are to become something else. Nor do I, as he continued, 'reject the concept that liberation for poor kids and linguistic minorities starts with accepting their culture and language and helping them to build on it.' Indeed, that is what I do advocate.*

As two of these three articles have seen frequent, heated discussion for almost ten years, what more can now profitably be said? I can offer my own brief responses, as one who has regularly used all three of these articles in work with experienced educators, prospective teachers, and community members. To balance my own views, I have included short responses from two other

thoughtful readers, one a suburban administrator and one an urban teacher.

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***Why do we hear so little representation from the multicultural voices which comprise the present-day American educational scene?"***

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First, it is clear that the basic question raised in the opening paragraph of "Skills and Other Dilemmas" is still very much with us: "Why do the refrains of progressive educational movements seem lacking in . . . the shades of tone expected in a truly heterogeneous chorus? Why do we hear so little representation from the multicultural voices which comprise the present-day American educational scene?" Delpit's voice has been and continues to be a vital, essential, and increasingly influential one reminding us of the centrality of this issue.

Second, I believe that "The Silenced Dialogue" represents a significant step forward because it explicitly rejects the "skills vs. process" dichotomy as a dialogical framework and replaces it with the much more risky and potentially fruitful examination of the previously silenced dialogue on the effects of a "culture of power" on instruction in schools (today there is a second, equally misguided dichotomy on everyone's lips, whole language vs. phonics). To gather a second

point of view on this issue, I asked for a response from John D'Auria, principal of a suburban Boston middle school where the student body is about 80% white, local students and 20% African-American students bussed daily from the city of Boston under a voluntary desegregation program. To me, D'Auria represents one of the types of readers Delpit hopes to reach and influence with her writing. He had this to say:

*I think Delpit has framed a very important educational debate. In our dialogue about how best to educate children of color, we often take for granted how much being part of a middle class provides in the form of educational support. Teaching from that perspective does not take into account many of the "codes" that allow students to be successful in school. The silenced dialogue occurs because the language used is one that is learned by participants in the culture of power (those in the middle or upper classes). Those outside the culture do not fully understand all the nuances and contexts that provide understanding. Delpit argues that being told explicitly the rules of this language/culture makes acquiring power easier. She also notes that those with power are often least aware — or least willing to acknowledge — the existence of such a culture. It is the latter point that makes this chapter difficult to describe. The author comes tantalizingly close to breaking through so that some of the codes embedded in this culture of power can become more visible. Although the examples used do help bring some solid dimensions to this concept, it still remains out of reach, I think, to most casual middle class white readers. I do, however, applaud this*

*work because it represents a span in a very important bridge that must be built in order for those in power to better understand what obstacles get in the way of learning when one lives outside the white middle class community.*

Third, I believe the critique Delpit develops in these articles writing as an African-American woman can be extended more generally to situations involving Hispanic, Asian, and white working class students. For example, many of the classroom incidents Delpit frames in a black-white context have almost exact counterparts in situations involving poor and working class white students in classrooms of white middle class teachers. Here, too, there is a cultural gulf to be crossed if students are to be well taught. A white teacher, who works in a high school that is rapidly changing from a white working class student body to one where significant percentages of students are Asian and Hispanic, had this to say about "Controversies Revisited":

*It's very provocative. It's meant to provoke, to make you think, and that's good. There are tremendous amounts of cultural misunderstanding happening in schools every day. But she talks as if there were no bureaucracy of schools, as if teachers were free agents with control over their curriculum, testing, materials, and schedules. I felt there was some teacher bashing here. She never talks about how school culture, class size, lack of resources make it hard to get to know students well enough to have the kind of sensitivity and personal knowledge of students that's needed*

to address these issues. She also uses 'African American' and 'people of color' almost interchangeably in her arguments; I feel this shortchanges the frequently very different cultural realities of my Hispanic and Asian students. In the same vein, some of the descriptions of communication styles that she calls black — for example directness in speech, the need for teachers to be directive and clear — are exact descriptions of the styles of my poor, white students.

As I read on in the book, it became clear that the point of view of the earlier essays had broadened considerably from a black-white to a multicultural focus that was just as incisive but more inclusive in its scope. "Lessons from Home and Abroad" showcases Lisa Delpit, the working anthropologist and teacher educator, first turning her formidable observational and analytic skills on her experiences as outsider, or "other," in such far-flung settings as Papua New Guinea and Native Alaskan villages, then using the knowledge gained as a framework for looking at the mainland United States culture she reenters.

For example, the third essay in this section, "Teachers Voices: Rethinking Teacher Education for Diversity" uses as its starting point the twin realizations that "black, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American children presently comprise almost 30 percent of the school-age population," and "the current number of teachers from nonwhite groups threatens to fall below 10 percent." In the essay, Delpit presents testimony gathered from non-white teachers about their experi-

ences in teacher education programs. An African-American elementary teacher says, "My teacher education was just a joke. I did everything I was supposed to do, but they weren't impressed. I was just too confident and outspoken. So I said to myself: 'I guess I have to play their game.' I began to shuffle my feet; Lisa, I literally had to grin and bow. And then I got an A."

Another African-American woman says this about her cooperating teacher: "She thought all black children were poor, but the kids in that school weren't poor. She kept talking about how we couldn't expect too much from them because they were poor. She even thought I was poor. She kept asking me questions like, 'Is your father unemployed a lot?'"

A Native Alaskan teacher complains about courses outside the education department which present a one-sided view, for example a history course, "Those history books just said, 'The Russians set up camp in Ruby' (an Alaskan village). Nowhere did they talk about how they killed natives for sport or stole women from their families and forced them to get married. My own Aunt was one of those women. . ."

I know of many teacher education programs, including my own, that are attempting to increase the number of minority students who enter. The stories in this essay suggest strongly that all of us should look hard, from the point of view of nonwhite students, at the attitudes, programmatic content, and quality of the experience they will encounter once they enroll.

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***What structural and attitudinal changes can we make, in increasingly diverse classrooms, to transform "the cultural clash between student and school" into authentic learning for all students?***

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The third section of the book, "Looking to the Future," builds on Delpit's earlier work to ask basic questions: how can teacher assessment become productively cross-cultural; how can teachers teach "literate discourse" effectively across boundaries of race, class, language, culture, and power; what structural and attitudinal changes can we make, in increasingly diverse classrooms, to transform "the cultural clash between student and school" into authentic learning for all students?

I found that in this section, my attention was drawn as much by how Delpit was making her points as it was by what she was saying. I felt that elements of her style that were strengths in other instances became limitations here. I am speaking, for example, of her reliance on one or two vividly told instances as the basis for large generalizations about how "white teachers" act or what "educators" should do; or prescriptions for action which assume individual classroom

*continued on page 35*



# Books

## *If Not Now: Developmental Readers in the College Classroom*

By Jeanne Henry

Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook,  
1995.



Reviewed by

BARBARA KAPLAN BASS

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I wonder how many college teachers were actually taught how to teach? When I was first offered a position teaching college writing, I ran to the university bookstore and settled in amongst the composition texts to figure out for myself how to teach the course. Every text there offered the same recipe: Teach the modes of discourse one at a time, discuss model essays, and assign an essay based on each mode. I soon abandoned teaching composition this way; it just felt wrong to me, but I had no idea why or how I should teach instead.

I wish Jeanne Henry had been my colleague as I struggled alone with my classroom pedagogy. Reading her book *If Not Now: Developmental Readers in the College Classroom* is like sitting in a warm kitchen on a cold morning, sipping coffee and talking shop-talk with a good friend, someone who is as good at teaching — or even better — than you are, who not only knows viscerally what is right for her students and goes for it, but can even point to the theory that supports those good instincts.

College pedagogy has been much on my mind lately. I'm currently enrolled in a graduate course, the focus of which is the application of learning theory to classroom instruction. Oblivious to the irony in his own practice, the professor stands behind a podium and lectures to us about how students

learn better when provided with opportunities to construct their own knowledge. We take copious notes. He doesn't realize that learning theory applies to adults as well as to children. I'm thinking of slipping him Jeanne Henry's book. After one semester of following the teacher's manual in her developmental reading classes at Northern Kentucky University, she "took all the college reading textbooks off the bookshelves" in her office and "dropped them one at a time into the trash can with a 'bomb's away' whistle." The next semester, Henry began using class time for reading rather than talking about reading."

Henry follows Nancie Atwell's reading workshop and refers to her for the nuts and bolts of the workshop approach, but even if you are familiar with Atwell's *In the Middle*, read *If Not Now*. Many teachers reject Atwell, arguing that her approach won't work in their classrooms. Henry, however, is flexible enough to apply Atwell's strategies to her own students who arrive under-prepared for college, burdened with poor attitudes about reading and education. They are "physically handicapped, learning disabled, poor... recovering from drug or alcohol addictions, or clinically depressed." Most are working or raising children. One of her students referred to the class as "the trauma ward."

In fact, Henry approaches reading workshop very much like a physical therapist approaches a client, retraining her students' minds just as a physical therapist retrains the body. She walks them through the steps required to get a library card and to find what they want at a book store. She reads to them on the floor, and includes minilessons on knowing when to abandon a book, how to predict what is going to happen next, and how to move beyond their comfort zone in reading.

Even if you are not familiar with *In the Middle*, read *If Not Now*. Henry includes her course syllabus which provides enough information about reading workshop to get started, a list of minilessons, and suggestions for a class library. She takes you through the process step by step in a humorous, natural style, describing how she chooses the popular fiction her students love ("I tend to go for anything with a bloody, clawed hand on the cover") or how she interacts with particularly outspoken students ("Talk to them, try to be understanding, and, if that fails, hide the body"). She also writes honestly about the work involved in teaching reading workshop: In one class alone, she responded to two hundred and twelve literary letters written by students and read fifteen to twenty books they recommended. Although she admits this approach is "labor intensive and time consuming," by the time you have finished *If Not Now*, you will understand why there is no other way to teach developmental reading.

The basis for reading workshop is, of course, reading, but it is also writing. Henry has adopted Atwell's "literary letters" to "sustain, maintain, and extend" her students' reading, letters which her students come to see as "a very particular kind of correspondence about books." Having tried "just about every writing-about-reading activity known to the profession," Henry notes that "the reciprocal nature of the reading and writing processes" found in the literary letters help her students establish a clear sense of audience and encourage authentic, engaged writing.

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***Writing about what they read allows developmental readers "to explore the meanings they find important," mingling "interpretation with self-evaluation."***

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Through her analysis of the 420 letters her students wrote to her in one semester, Henry confirms that writing about what they read allows developmental readers "to explore the meanings they find important," mingling "interpretation with self-evaluation." Here is one sample she includes from one of those literary letters, written after reading *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker:

*You better thank God when the people around you show their love freely. You think about what it means to live with contempt like Celie did. Lots of people do. I'm going to*

*remember this when my mother gets smothering. She just loves me.*

Jeanne Henry views teachers as experts, defends her pedagogical choices, values teacher-research, and searches across the grade levels for what's best for her students. She also applies theory to classroom instruction, digesting Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory and demonstrating how to apply it to Atwell's practice. She adds to this theoretical mix Carole Edelsky's definitions of authentic and inauthentic reading, a combination which helps Henry understand that her students have not rejected all reading, just school reading. She has theoretical foundation to drive her practice, but she doesn't let theory get in the way of learning from her students. They remind her, among other important lessons, that "even an escapist novel can take you inside yourself and inspire enough insight to make you evaluate your life."

I do have some concerns about Henry's approach. She seems to dismiss learning disabilities such as ADD and dyslexia, saying that students "may have been labeled" as such, implying that they may not be learning disabled at all, but instead what she terms "entrenched nonreaders." Although the students Henry describes do learn "the purposes and pleasures" of reading, she doesn't deal with those students, such as my own daughter, who *can't* rather than *won't* read a book. I've tempted her with 90210 and Melrose Place paperbacks, *Nightmare on Elm Street* gore and the X-files, but her learning disabilities

make reading anxiety-producing and just plain hard work. On NKU's open-admissions campus, Henry might find my daughter in her section of LAP091. Part of me wants to ship her off to Henry special delivery, but a bigger part of me is skeptical. The reading workshop approach can't work all the time. Although Henry provides us with caveats, she

never examines how these truly LD students fare in her workshop.

On a minor note, I would also have liked an index. Although Henry's book is meant as a reader-friendly description of her doctoral research, someone using *If Not Now* as a guide for reading workshop may have trouble pinpointing particular sections for advice. Perhaps the best approach

is to have both *If Not Now* and *In the Middle* on hand as you attempt reading workshop in your own classes. They not only complement each other, they extend each other's reach. Henry's book offers teacher-tested, theory-based pedagogy for the college classroom. She reminds us that good reading is authentic, interactive, significant, and aesthetic. *If Not Now* meets all of these criteria.

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## Other People's Children

*continued from page 32*

teachers are in charge of their own professional lives to a much greater extent than research and experience tell us that they are.

However, as I thought further, the instances I had first seen as "limitations" began to present themselves in a different light — as examples pointing towards a central difficulty or deep point for all of us engaged in this kind of work to think through. I am speaking of the difficulty surrounding acceptance of narrative, anecdotal, or personally-based speaking or writing as valid evidence or research. There is a great deal of highly valuable evidence about what is happening in schools that exists only in this form, and certainly it has a place in serious conversations about many aspects of education. But when is storytelling vital narrative evidence, and when is it just storytelling? When can it profitably be used, and how? By whom and in what contexts? In an earlier essay, Delpit com-

ments on the difficulties her students of color have encountered in having their narrative form of presentation taken seriously... "the university does not as a rule value personal narrative as having a legitimate cognitive function. Discourse in the university setting is more valued if it reflects independence of context, analysis, and objectification of experience."

Like others of Delpit's insights, the observations that she advances from a minority perspective can be extended to link up with and complement similar observations from other areas of education. In this instance, teacher researchers fighting for acceptance of their classroom-based studies, and practitioner-writers telling their own stories about school reform from their own classroom-eye viewpoint, are conspicuous examples. In both cases, an educational establishment comfortable with techniques that rely on "objectification of

experience" has posed significant obstacles to the acceptance of narrative-based work by practitioners.

In conclusion, this is an essential book in its field, one that collects influential, previously scattered work published over the last ten years. Like many collections, it occasionally repeats itself. But this is a small price to pay for a book that is readable, direct, insightful, provocative, reality-based, and speaks to the increasingly large number of teachers and teacher-educators for whom diversity and equity are basic professional issues.

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# NWP & UPDATE

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## NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT RECEIVES FEDERAL FUNDING FOR FISCAL YEAR 1996

Richard Sterling, Executive Director of the National Writing Project, has announced that after a "tremendous struggle" which enlisted the efforts of directors, co-directors and teachers throughout the nation, the NWP has been included in the Congressional Budget for the fiscal year 1996. "We feel very fortunate," said Sterling. "Many other programs were not so lucky."

As will be the case with most federal programs, congressional funding for NWP quite likely will be reduced. However, because NWP is forward-funded, the Project will receive federal dollars at least through 1997.

While the NWP received valuable help from many individuals during this campaign, according to Sterling, Senator Thad Cochran of Mississippi played a crucial role in this effort. "Without Senator Cochran," Sterling said, "our network as we know it would cease to exist." Readers can thank Cochran for his incredible support by calling his office at 202-224-5054.

## PROJECT OUTREACH SITES SELECTED

In February, a twelve-person selection committee met in Berkeley, California, to select the 18 NWP sites which will participate in Project Outreach, a network of NWP sites aimed specifically at improving writing instruction in schools with large numbers of students from low-income backgrounds. Thirty-two writing projects prepared applications to join Project Outreach.

Director of Project Outreach, Elyse Eidman-Aadahl, said of these applications, "They were always inspiring, and sometimes gut-wrenching." The applications came from all parts of the country, from young as well as old sites and from sites of modest means as well as those more amply funded. Eidman-Aadahl commented that the site-based teams that prepared the applications gave testimony to their long-standing concern about equity within their

own project as well as their service areas and their own aspirations for growth. "Reading the applications, you see even more deeply why the National Writing Project is important and why it works. But you also see all the teachers we haven't begun to reach and get a sense of the tremendous contribution they can make in their classrooms and in their Writing Projects," she said.

The Selection Committee had as a goal to create a microcosm of the National Writing Project: a mix of geographic regions, types of sites, new and old sites, and sites with different funding patterns. After a long day, the committee chose the following sites for the Project Outreach network:

Alaska State Writing Consortium, Juneau, AK  
Alcorn Writing Project, Lorman, MS  
Borinquen Writing Project, San Juan, PR  
Capital Area Writing Project, Raleigh, NC  
Coastal Georgia Writing Project, Savannah, GA  
D.C. Area Writing Project, Washington, DC  
Kennesaw Mountain Writing Project, Kennesaw, GA  
Leigh Valley Writing Project, Foglesville, PA  
MSU/Writing Thinking Project, Mississippi State, MI  
Northern California Writing Project, Chico, CA  
Northern Nevada Writing Project, Sparks, NV  
NWP of Acadia, Lafayette, LA  
OSU Writing Project, Stillwater, OK  
Red Cedar Writing Project, East Lansing, MI  
Rio Grande Writing Project, Albuquerque, NM  
Saginaw Valley NWP, Saginaw, MI  
South Coast Writing Project, Santa Barbara, CA  
West Virginia Writing Project, South Charlottesville, WV

In April, teacher consultants from these sites met in Berkeley to begin planning for the network's first National Summer Institute. "We're ready to work on our sites, to improve them and to share with our NWP colleagues what we learn along the way," said Pam Morgan, a teacher consultant from Maryland and one of Project Outreach's National Coordinators.

## Call for Manuscripts

*We welcome lively, well-written articles on the writing process and on teaching writing, as well as articles on research in the teaching of it. The articles can take the form of personal experience or opinion, or can explore the work of others who have contributed to the field.*

*We are especially interested in articles by classroom teachers. If you have an idea you would like to develop, send a query letter or give us a call at 510-642-0976. Send ideas, drafts, and completed manuscripts (if possible include a disk) to: The NWP/CSW Quarterly, Graduate School of Education, 5627 Tolman Hall, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720.*

— The Editors

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# *The Quarterly*

OF THE NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT & THE CENTER FOR THE STUDY  
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Summer 1996

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**Clicking on the Icon:  
New Windows, Stronger Voices**

# CONTENTS

## CONNECTIONS: RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

- Clicking on the Icon: How Technology Helped  
Amplify Some "Micro-Voices" 1  
JABARI MAHIRI

## WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

- Energy Conservation: The Evolution of  
Experimenters' Workshop 9  
ALEXA STUART

## BOOK REVIEW

- Teaching Grammar in Context 15  
BILL LYONS

## VIEWPOINT

- "Our Wal-Mart Is Bigger Than Our Mall":  
Writing That Matters 18  
SUZANNE STYRON EDWARDS

## UNDER THE MICROSCOPE: TEACHER RESEARCH

- Real World Feminism: A Teacher Learns  
from Her Students' Writing 21  
LISA ORTA
- The Perils and Pleasures of Teacher Research:  
Excerpts from a Journal I Never Kept 29  
MARTHA DUDLEY

## NWP & CSW UPDATE 36

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ELIZABETH CREWS

# Clicking on the Icon: How Technology Helped Amplify Some "Micro-Voices"

by

JABARI MAHIRI



A few years ago, while I was doing research in a community sports setting, I began thinking about computer-mediated instruction as a way of aiding the writing development of underprepared college students. As I studied players of computer games, I documented the considerable competence and lack of anxiety these young players demonstrated as they manipulated these complex programs. The most successful of these games created a high degree of challenge and a sense of empowerment for the players. I wanted to find out if underprepared student writers would benefit in similar ways if they had the chance to use computer technology.

I set out to investigate this question as a teacher researcher. I configured two college writing classes so that

they were composed primarily of student athletes who had severe problems with the demands of college writing. Many of these athletes were extremely successful in their sports. Several were national-class competitors and had been recruited by Division One schools all over the country. In a six-minute video I made about my work in this class, I documented the contrasting worlds in which these athletes live. In one sequence we see a student hunched over a keyboard — the key spacing way too small for hands that effortlessly palm a basketball. Then there is a cut to the same student slamming down a spectacular dunk on national TV. "He lights up a team," the announcer screams. "You won't find a better freshman player in the country." In the heady prowess of their microsecond reflexes captured in slow motion replays on national TV, in the delirious adula-

tion of fans, these were the "lucky" few that the young players in my community sports study had "Hoop Dreams" of becoming.



Yet, some of the high-profile athletes in my college class were already seeing their dreams unravel. Two of the best high school football players in the state of California had suffered career-threatening injuries that prevented them from playing during their freshman year. Even those who remained healthy were often unsettled after seeing the exceptional quality of other Division One athletes who were competing for scarce placements on professional sports teams after college. As these students came to see their talents transformed into commodities, they increasingly defined themselves as athletes above all else, and as a result their views and voices in the world beyond sports became more and more constricted.

This situation was part of the reason that these students arrived at the university possessing only what I came to call "micro-voices." I first thought this term would be an interesting way to characterize the kind of writing that can go on in micro-computer labs.

However, over the course of this study, this term also came to stand for the initial "tiny" voices that some of these students brought to college. I learned that many feared writing, but many also lacked the motivation to write. For most of these students, writing had never been a valued or functional part of their social practices. Consequently, a significant part of the challenge was to help them locate, experiment with, learn to trust, and eventually amplify their voices.

A more specific word now about the setting in which I taught these students and conducted my research. In the fall of 1993 and again in the fall of 1994, I volunteered to teach a section of College Writing at U.C. Berkeley. Both of the sections were taught entirely within one of the new micro-computer labs. My classes were made up primarily of students who had failed to pass College Writing when it was offered during the University's Summerbridge Program, a summer program intended to equip entering students for university work. Most of the 14 students in each section were scholarship athletes. Only three were female, two of them also scholarship athletes. About half the students in both classes were African American, while the other half was made up of about equal numbers of Latino, Asian and white students.

In many ways the micro-computer lab was an ideal setting to carry on my work as a participant observer. I constructed a teacher-as-coach persona (in this case a writing coach) in developing classroom activities. Yet I found that the most important part of my work needed to take place out of class where it was crucial to design a good balance of activities: individual work on computers, group computer activities, whole group discussions on our readings, and one-on-one dialogues between my students and me, as well as dialogues between student pairs.

The three-hour class sessions would often take on an office-like atmosphere as students worked at different levels and often on different assigned projects, controlling the order and pace of their tasks. To facilitate this structure, I provided each student with a detailed assignment sheet at the beginning of the first class of each week. These assignment sheets alerted students to their writing priorities for the week and provided them with material to help them prepare for our oral



discussions. Students would take a break or two during the period and even leave the building to get refreshments.

Although I dictated the time restraints on the breaks, students individually determined when and how they would break up their work. This structure allowed for extended periods during class when I could either observe or interact with students. I would usually keep a field note page active on my computer where I would often type in observations as class transpired.

But while the computer lab provided a superior environment for a teacher researcher, I understood that my principal job here was to prepare my students for success in the university. The gaps in the preparedness of these athletes are especially glaring at a major academic university where they sometimes have to endure opposing fans heckling "Prop 48" or "SAT" to call attention to special conditions through which athletes are sometimes admitted. Their high school teachers in some cases contributed to their underpreparation either by being somewhat in awe of these athletes themselves on the one hand, or by not having any real expectations for them on the other. One of my students told me that he really had liked English all through high school, but his teachers never required anything of him in class because they excessively admired his talent on the field.

Stereotypical attitudes about athletes can be devastating for these students in other ways, as revealed in the following excerpt from a November 1994 article in the *Daily Californian*, U.C.B.'s campus newspaper:

*A woman called the Daily Cal ... livid about a photo we ran in our second Game Day special issue. It shows [two of the students in my writing class] ... sitting in a line on the bleachers at Memorial Stadium ... holding up four fingers.*

*Our caller, a school teacher, was certain the two frosh football players were flashing gang signs, and was concerned her students would get the wrong message about gangs.*

*No [they] ... are not Crips, or Bloods, or anything close. The four fingers stood for 1994, their recruiting class, and if they're members of any gang, it's the one that tames the field at Memorial every day for practice.*

It was because so many of my students saw themselves as athletes first that I tried the fuzzy logic of a sports metaphor to push them beyond their micro-voices. In my students' early essays, it seemed that no matter what the topic or mode of writing, they were only able to generate about a page and a half of text. So, I did something that I thought I would never do in a writing class. I set a two-page minimum on all essay assignments. And here's where the metaphor came in. There were students in the class who could run a 40-yard dash in a blazing 4.4 seconds. I challenged them to break the two-page barrier. Of course, this barrier was not a problem for a number of students, but for those who were truly underprepared, it represented a rather formidable obstacle.

---

***There were students in the class who could run a 40-yard dash in a blazing 4.4 seconds. I challenged them to break the two-page barrier.***

---

I started getting papers that began more than a third of the way down the first page. Margins got wider and wider. Type faces began to change from Palatino to New York, a slightly larger style of type. I even received a couple of essays where the type size had been pumped up from 12 to 14 points. I commended these students on their "creativity," but I became more adamant about the requirement that they break the two-page barrier. But I will admit to sometimes being a little baffled as I looked for ways to aid those students who were having real problems generating text.

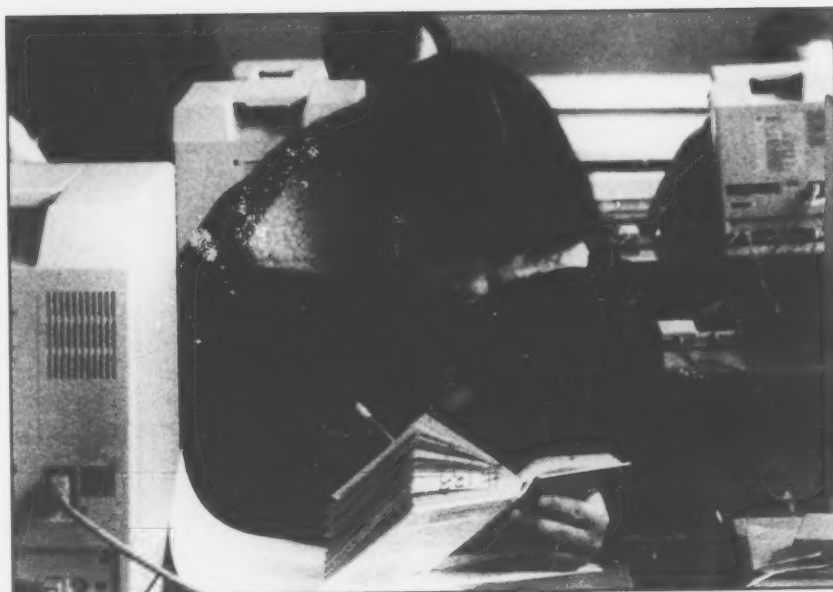
Jerod is a case in point. Jerod and I were working with problems in an essay he had written about a terrible car accident he had been in while home on break. Another car had run a red light and plowed into the car he was driving. His injuries were so serious that it was not clear if he would ever be able to play sports again.

Jerod's essay on this topic had lightly probed a provocative aspect of an identity theme. He wrote about how this whole episode was forcing him to come to terms with who he really was as a person beyond the bright lights and cameras and the roar of the crowds.

But in his treatment of this theme, with all its possibilities for details and connections, Jerod was still having trouble fleshing out what could become an extremely powerful and illuminating essay. Ironically, several lengthy articles had appeared about this episode in the sports pages of major newspapers that Jerod had read. Yet he was having trouble breaking the two-page barrier and finding the voice to tell his own dramatic story in writing.

While working with Jerod on this piece, I hit on an image that seemed to help students move past the micro-voices that were restricting their writing. It was a heuristic made possible by the way the computers themselves operated. I was explaining how Jerod could look at the slightly developed images or episodes in his paper like they were icons on the screen of his computer. Though each icon had limited, surface meaning, when he clicked on that icon it would launch a program that was rich and dense with additional meanings and details. Each icon on the screen was a window into a larger, more complicated, more detailed world. I gave him examples of the way he could "click" on a particular image or episode in his paper and launch more of the detail, explore more connections, or establish more of the context that rested just below the surface of the existing text. This computer metaphor became a useful way for me to talk to students about specific areas of their papers that needed to be fleshed out and pumped up in order to avoid a state of "arrested development" — a term I appropriated for use in the class because it was also the name of a popular rap group that some of the students in the class liked. I would like now to look at how this concept of "clicking on the icon" played out with one student, Ray, in his essay "Stentorian Man."

"Stentorian Man" was written in response to an early assignment that asked students to describe an oddball character. They were to consider a colorful character from their past or present life and to write about that person's behavior in a particular activity or event that gave insight into why or how the person was such an



oddball. When Ray handed in the first draft of his essay, excerpted below, it was barely a page and a half, a micro-voice example of "arrested development":

#### *Stentorian Man*

*After using up all my perennial excuses, I finally decided to end my procrastination and read Lives on the Boundary, so on Sunday afternoon, after waking up I tried to read in my dorm room. However, in a college dorm there are too many distractions and within ten minutes I singing to the new "Boyz to Men" CD:*

*So I sit away lonely  
And I get away only in my mind...*

*However after listening to this music I became very sober, and I thought for my own sake, I had to turn it off. While searching for something else to entertain myself, I remembered that I had to read. So with a dollar and a Fat Slice coupon in my pocket and Lives on the Boundary in my hand I left my dorm room searching for a place to read.*

*Heading to Fat Slice to get a slice of their delicious pizza pie I noticed that the weather was nice. For it was mild, not too hot or too cold as it has been for the past three weeks and I thought that maybe Sproul Plaza would be a perfect place to read. And although during the week Sproul Plaza is usually noisy and chaotic, on the weekend there is a certain peace that prevails around the area. That was until I saw one of the strangest people I have ever seen.*

*Trying to read my book so that I could do the assignment that was due the next day, I was startled when I heard piercing sounds that disturbed the calm. I looked up to see a short bald man with a cup in his hand from whom the sound was resonating. Obviously a beggar he would asked people for change and if they refused to give money he would wail to the top of his lungs usually scaring the people off in a hurried gallop. I think when describing this character I should clarify this scream.*

*At first it sounded like a nonsense song with no coherent words that was sung off key and too loud. However after being forced to listen to this man his scream sounded like a warrior call and it could have been beautiful if he didn't assault everyone with his stentorian way. He stopped for a while and I thought maybe I could continue to get some reading in but he continued to blow.*

*I was frustrated now beyond belief and I thought if he approached me I would react in a negative way and thus I left. His oddness fascinated me though and the way he used his mystic to frighten people showed me fears that overwhelm the human soul.*

I want to discuss the "icons" that Ray found and "clicked on" as he worked through seven more drafts of this paper, but first I want to describe certain aspects of the class that helped Ray flesh out his writing once he had "clicked on."

We had read and discussed several writings that described oddball characters — some models I provided, some students provided — anchoring a discussion on the piece they had selected. This was one method of getting students to contribute to the content of the class. I brought in an article from an alternative newspaper which described Kaufman, an oddball comic who "more than anyone else pushed the dada edge of the comedy envelope." We had read about Dag in Douglass Coupland's *Generation X*, a self-described "lesbian trapped inside a man's body." In class discussions students made connections with other oddball characters that they knew or had read about, like Jack MacFarland in Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary*, whose "teeth were stained, he tucked his sorry tie in between the third and fourth buttons of his shirt, and his pants were chronically wrinkled," but he could "teach his heart out."

Another contributing factor to Ray's essay may have been the discussion we had had about the plight of the homeless. Most of these students were not from the Bay Area, and they were shocked by the number and condition of the homeless people they encountered daily. In response to an article about a homeless man named Theoomigabo who challenged many naive perceptions about homeless people, a student brought in an article from a local newspaper which reviewed Howard Schatz's book, *Homeless: Portraits of Americans in Hard Times*. The class took a trip to the University Art Museum where we viewed an exhibit of Schatz's photographs.

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***Each icon on the screen was a window into a larger, more complicated, more detailed world... He could "click" on a particular image or episode in his paper and launch more of the detail, explore more connections, or establish more of the context that rested just below the surface of the existing text.***

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Another experience that quite likely influenced Ray as he was working thought his drafts of "Stentorian Man" was a piece by Oakland writer Emily Gurnon entitled "Staking Claim." Indeed, this article had an impact on the writing of most every writer in the class.

"Staking Claim" was brought to class by Leticia, who also anchored our discussion on it. Leticia was a single mother who initially used family relationships with her son and her estranged relationship with her father as a catalyst for her early narrative writing. It was easy to see why the article was significant for her. It was about Gurnon's relationship with her father whose influence on her life was consciously negated or resisted until she understood that those reactions had more to do with her than with him. She wrote, "My dad was the person who pulled up to the curb each Saturday ... and took us out to lunch at McDonald's. ... I started looking for my father in other people ... in high school teachers, in church pastors, and later in lovers. I would remake him and remake myself." It was about her coming to value and thereby claim her

roots. It was this theme that made a definite impression on my students. New college students are at an age and in a situation that forces them to consider complex issues of identity and family and community connectedness, especially since they have often been distanced from their familiar support systems, and they must consequently determine how they will represent themselves in and to a larger, stranger world.

---

***Ray and I went over and identified the "menu" of points in his paper that could be imaginatively "clicked on." We found ways to open windows through which he could see more details and summon feelings and perceptions...***

---

As Leticia used family ties, Ray, like some of the other African American students, regularly used issues from African American culture to focus his writing. These concerns emerged as the drafts of "Stentorian Man" progressed.

Another aspect of the class that may have influenced Ray's subsequent drafts was my decision to encourage those students who chose to do so to try out some imagery. Imagery, often overly intensive, was a feature of all of Ray's writing. Even when corresponding with individual students of a class in a local high school, Ray's letter incorporated lots of imagery. A couple of lines from the beginning of one letter illustrates this:

*Dear Betty: As I look out the window two clouds hang in the gray sky, creating a pervasive gloomy and somber mood. The rain comes intermittently, reminding me of good old days when I used to sleep beneath the fire place, warm and protected from the cruel forces of the outside world. However, as I grow older, shelter and my comfort seem to fade.*

In the first conference with Ray, I reminded him of the icon metaphor I had come up with while working with Jerod. Ray and I went over and identified the "menu" of points in his paper that could be imaginatively "clicked on." We found ways to open windows

through which he could see more details and summon feelings and perceptions to give depth to what so far had been a surface treatment of potentially provocative themes. In our discussion we agreed that the essay as originally written had a menu of three basic items: Ray's mood and objective to read on a Sunday morning, a change in mood posed by an obstacle to his objective — the Stentorian Man — and Ray's realization that beyond his frustration he was also fascinated by this man. Disclosing the elemental structure of the essay helped Ray see the fundamental decision points — those places where he could "click on" for more development — and it also revealed that essentially this essay was more about Ray himself than it was about the Stentorian Man. This perception was an important consideration for refocusing the piece.

At the first of these three broad decision points, Ray used imagery. "I used the sun to forecast the mood," he later reflected in his portfolio. Ray lived in one of the high-rise dorms just off campus, and after substantial revisions, he incorporated his dorm room view of the San Francisco Bay in the opening scene, giving tone and texture to his psychological state as he wrestled with his procrastination to do his homework. After briefly acknowledging his struggle not to jump back in bed and go to sleep, he showed how the beauty of the day itself and his recognition of the grandeur of the world outside his window helped make him want to go outside and find a place to do his reading:

*I threw back the curtains ... [and] the grandeur of the bay area morning emerged as if my window framed a canvas of the picturesque landscape. Like an art critic, I peered deeply into this painting and was impressed by the amazing detail. The bay bridge was like a huge prehistoric beast with tiny speckled insects buzzing along its curved back. To the left, the loading cranes on the edge of the east bay looked like giant horses, motionless and hypnotized. To the right the trans-America Building rose out of downtown San Francisco demanding respect for its magnitude and aesthetics. In the middle of the bay, Alcatraz stood or rather slumped like an old man, warped and decayed by the passage of time, dead and dark on the inside. Rising behind this remnant of another era, the old lady A.K.A. the Golden Gate Bridge in all of her prestige and glory stood guard over the bay, beckoning in hope and pride, and everything bowed to her beauty. As I look even closer, I could see the birds in*

*the distance and hear their gawking as they flew above the trees that blanketed Berkeley. I could almost taste the whip cream clouds floating by when I realized that the aroma of pizza from Fat Slice down on Telegraph had floated up to my room. Looking at the clock, I remembered that I had to read for college writing. So, with a dollar and a Fat Slice coupon in my pocket and Lives on the Boundary in hand I left in search of a place to read.*

Whereas the dorm room scene in the first draft had touched lightly upon the procrastination theme through Ray's listening to the "Boyz to Men" CD rather than getting on with his homework, he discarded that strategy entirely in favor of a much more extensive description linked to his room-with-a-view. We eventually used the final draft of this essay as one of our models for writing, and in discussing his work, Ray talked about how he had revised this scene to communicate more than his procrastination. He noted how the tone of awe at the beauty of the sights outside his window was also designated to establish a mood of dream-like tranquillity against which his eventual encounter with the Stentorian Man would collide.

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***Real computers — as well as metaphorical ones — facilitated text generation ... Using the computer lab allowed students to work at different projects and at their own pace.***

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Ray further noted how the computer metaphor that we had discussed worked to help him develop both content and structure. In writing this scene, he tried to imagine that his dorm window was like the screen of his computer, with the major features of the view before him each represented by a flat icon that he would then click on in his imagination in order to see the detail behind the surface. To describe this process in computer terminology, Ray had treated the broad decision points of his essay like three program folders into which he could drag-and-drop a variety of ideas. He was able to create a menu of choices for launching more detail in writing.

Ray operated on the next decision point in his essay — his encounter with the Stentorian Man — in a similar way. It had come out in class discussions that he was really conflicted by the situation of homeless people in the Bay Area. He had written another essay on that topic entitled "Them" which chronicled his shock at seeing a fairly young man and his three children sitting on Telegraph Avenue begging for change and food. The Stentorian Man was also a beggar "dressed in red sweater shirt, corduroy pants and sneakers with an empty cup in his outstretched hand." But as his skeletal description became clothed with more detail through successive revisions, the force of the Stentorian Man's presence also took on added significance as the axis on which the key theme as well as the structure of the essay turned. Unlike draft one, which stepped lightly around Ray's frustration — suggesting its source was the Stentorian Man's vociferous screams which prevented Ray from reading *Lives on the Boundary* — the final draft honestly and painfully probes the intense feelings of disdain that Ray was experiencing in attempting to read a real life on the boundary.

*I began to see him as the devil. ... Wailing at the top of his lungs, he used his voice as a threatening weapon, scaring many people away. ... Although I was unsure on whether he was upset that no one proceeded to give him money, or he was demented, I hated him. This morning's serene painting was being slashed forever by this demon.*

Yet Ray's revised essay went on to reveal how he was simultaneously fascinated as well as repelled by this eerie presence:

*Something deep and latent in me was attracted to his cacophony. His self-asserting commanding tone entranced me like the painting did.*

Reading these words about "self-asserting and commanding tone," I was reminded of another incident with Ray in class. Ray, like several other students, often chose issues in African American culture on which to focus his writing. For example, one of his contributions to the class curriculum on which he anchored a discussion was a selection from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. He was passionate about these issues. In one class discussion on *The Color Purple*, Ray strongly disagreed when I suggested that the book revealed ways that the oppression of black women



was every bit as intense as it was for black men, and black men did at times engage in destructive behavior that was not always the consequence of racism and white supremacy. Ray expressed his view that black men were the special targets of racism and white supremacy. It was a view that I had heard many times before. I didn't relent in my position; Ray relentlessly pursued his. He couldn't contain himself in his seat. He stood up in our "talking circle" and paced back and forth as he made his points. For a moment he was the man — the Stentorian Man.

At the third decision point, working through successive drafts and in contrast to the open ending of the initial draft, Ray reveals an epiphany. Influenced by the "staking claims" essay, Ray connects the Stentorian Man to his own identity quest. Something essential about the Stentorian Man represented something essential about Ray. When he was able to embrace this essential quality of himself that was represented in the other, he wrote, "...my mind was able to break through his wall of sound and on the other side a landscape appeared. It was Africa." In breaking through this wall of sound, Ray was able to stake claim to this other landscape which counterbalanced his earlier description of the San Francisco Bay. When he came down from the lofty panorama of his room-with-a-view, he was able to see something of equal grandeur "reflecting black" in a single life on the streets. He wrote:

*I could see her majestic mountains that rose out of the rich soil, touching God. I could see her powerful waterfalls and life giving rivers, that surged like arteries, with a cargo as precious as blood. I could see her ancient ruins, calculated and precise that told arcane tales of great civilizations. I could see the great animals on the plains of the savanna moving with agility, dignified and proud. Beyond his wall of sound, I could feel the sun cradling my body like I was his child, taste the rich snow on the mountains, had the varied languages springing forth from diverse communities, smell the smorgasbord of delicious food, and intuitively I felt I belonged.*

In the elegance of its structure, in the vividness of its images, in the light it sheds on life and learning, "Stentorian Man" speaks, indeed, in a loud yet lucid voice. Operating on an initially limited theme, Ray was to use a computer heuristic — clicking on the icon — for invention. This technique, along with the models of writing that were being continually critiqued in

class, helped motivate and facilitate the intense introspection, interrogation and invention that led to this final piece.

### Conclusion

How was it that the "arrested development" of Ray's first draft became the eloquent statement of his final draft? First, the co-created curriculum to which both the students and I contributed writing models motivated students to write by incorporating and building on their voices and choices. I believe that students also benefited from my collaborative teaching style that included a willingness to make use of computer technology. Real computers — as well as metaphorical ones — facilitated text generation. Remember, Ray went through seven drafts of this paper. Using the computer lab allowed students to work at different projects and at their own pace. They were, however, all expected to "write like crazy."

In the process, these students actually changed themselves. In various ways and in varying degrees, they broke through their fears of writing and began to see themselves as writers; they broke through some of the boundaries of difference and stretched their perceptions to see similarities on the other side. They broke through the walls of stentorian sound that surrounded them to find and affirm unique writing voices. Ray ended the last version of his essay with a description of how he had re-visioned the Stentorian Man and which, I think, partially reflects these claims:

*Seeing the man again, he was dressed in a brown leather dingo. His feet were tethered with sandals and in his outstretched hand he carried a spear. His taut body glistened in the sun, and his cacophony transformed into a powerful warrior call. In his woeful song, I heard the voice of mother Africa, calling me home.*

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# Energy Conversion:

## The Evolution of Experimenters' Workshop

by

ALEXA STUART



One day, in the last year of my training to become a teacher, Dick Rezba, my instructor in a science methods class, set a bag in front of each student. The bags contained a collection of objects which inspired no particular excitement: wires, coils, batteries and magnets.

Dick said, "I want you to experiment with these for about 30 minutes, and then we will share what we discovered."

I opened my bag hesitantly, almost frightened to touch anything. I had rarely touched things in science class, except on command. "Hands-on-science" in my education usually meant watching demonstrations and conducting experiments to the rhythmic mantra, "O.K., don't touch until I tell you. Otherwise, it might not turn out right."

Now I was invited to touch without restriction. In the classroom, the excitement was palpable.

*"Wow, look at this!"*

*"Does yours do that when you put the magnet close?"*

*"Let me see if it does that again."*

*"What did you do to make yours do that?"*

*"I wonder why it does this?"*

*"I wonder if it is because the magnet affects the electron's flow?"*

*"Let's see, if the current is flowing because of the magnet, then this should happen when I try this."*

At the end of 30 minutes, we had a lively discussion about what we had observed and why we thought it had happened. I realized that in 16 years of science education, this was the first time I had been allowed to truly experiment.

Dick went on to encourage us to create experiments based on our interests. I liked to make chocolate chip cookies, so he encouraged me to brainstorm cookie experiments. For example, I compared the taste of cookies made with margarine to those made with butter.

I came to realize that, outside of science class, I had been doing the work of a scientist over much of my life. Years earlier, for instance, when my brother and I had raced home from the neighborhood store, each using a route we believed was shorter, we were conducting experiments. Our argument about whether one of us was running faster than the other was an argument about controlling variables. When our

mother tried to help us settle the dispute by driving the two routes, odometer running, we were — because no automobile can cut corners like a kid in full flight — left with a dose of the uncertainty that drives scientific work.

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***The unspoken reality was that students were often writing for me and not their classmates — and it showed. The writing lacked depth and enthusiasm. And to be honest, I didn't look forward to reading thirty explanations of how photosynthesis works.***

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I had also been conducting experiments during my student teaching when I tried a new approach to quiet a noisy class, reflected on the results, and used this information to inform my next approach.

I was excited by my new understanding of the purpose of science and experimenting. Experiments moved from the pages of the science fair books to become a part of day-to-day reality. However when I began teaching, the demands of the curriculum, the pressures of the job and my own insecurities about trying something new made it difficult for me to change my science program from the way I had been taught in elementary school.

As a new teacher, I became involved with the Writing Project and was exposed to the concept of writers' workshop. It made so much sense to me. Of course, students learn to write by actually writing — instead of by filling out worksheets. In writers' workshop, I had children craft pieces according to their own interests and experiences, hire editors, and publish their work as they became "featured authors." Students begged for more writing time. They dedicated themselves to the task of producing quality work they could share with others. They constantly surprised me and themselves with fresh insights.

Science class, however, had no such flow to it. Even though I prepared for hours trying to make the cur-

riculum goals clear — for example, teaching the relationship between mass, weight, density and volume — my science teaching left me feeling strangely empty. I often used writing to test the students' understanding of a science concept, but the unspoken reality was that students were often writing for me and not their classmates — and it showed. The writing lacked depth and enthusiasm. And to be honest, I didn't look forward to reading thirty explanations of how photosynthesis works.

My other goal was to use hands-on experiments, so I led the class through experiments I found in books. It was a constant struggle to keep the children following the prescribed steps. When I had the class respond to questions about experiments, again their writing was rote and predictable.

I worked hard to prepare demonstrations, spending time prepping and getting everything just right. Then came the "wow," and then it was over with lots of clean-up ahead.

I became particularly aware that my science class lacked purpose when I contrasted it with the excitement and energy of the writers' workshop. When I had children write their thoughts about writing, they wrote:

*Writing is a wondrous thing. Whatever you're thinking ends up on you're paper before you even finish thinking about it.*

*Writers' workshop is like blossoming into a new flower.*

When I had them write about science they wrote:

*Science is like a pencil. It begins and soon it's gone.*

*Science is like learning about one topic after another in a lot of detail.*

*Science is like ... I couldn't think of anything.*

This writing exercise affirmed what I had noticed. How could I explain the difference between students' clear and joyful statements about writing and their foggy, uninspired statements about science? What was I going to do about it? After a great many false starts and days where I put in more time hoping that

things would feel different, I thought back to my experience in college. Maybe I could create a science workshop much like my writers' workshop. Just as students in writers' workshop became engaged as writers, students in experimenters' workshop could become engaged as scientists: constructing hypotheses, experimenting, and sharing findings. I would start with a mini-lesson and then, just as students in writers' workshop designed their own pieces, students in science workshop would design their own experiments. In both, students would write, share, respond to each other and publish their finished work.

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*The children were completely absorbed in their work. Suddenly, they cared if their measurements were accurate, and they put me to work showing them how to recalibrate a scale.*

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I decided to give it a try. Since we had been discussing states of matter, I gave each child a cotton ball dipped in rubbing alcohol, a cotton ball dipped in water, and threw in a piece of recycled paper for good measure. I explained the basic structure for what we would be calling "experimenters' workshop." I made clear that the process would be similar to writers' workshop. I told students they could use any tools on the science shelves, such as scales and thermometers, and that they should write down their observations and explanations so that we could share them. My biggest fear was that when I said, "now experiment," they would not know what to do.

I was surprised that my brief guidelines were not followed by a barrage of questions. The students seemed to know exactly what to do.

Of course, a part of me was hoping that within the context of their new-found freedom students would still do what I wanted them to do. That is, since we were studying states of matter, they would compare the evaporation rates of alcohol and water. Some students did. One student was glancing back and forth between the clock and the streaks of rubbing

alcohol and water she had made on her recycled paper. When the alcohol streak disappeared, she recorded the time in her learning log, and then recorded the time when her water streak disappeared. She subtracted, calculating the difference. One student dropped her two cotton balls from above her head to the recycled paper on the floor to see if one dropped faster than the other. Most students went in directions that would not have occurred to me. One child was weighing each cotton ball to see if one weighed more than the other.

The children were completely absorbed in their work. Suddenly, they cared if their measurements were accurate, and they put me to work showing them how to recalibrate a scale.

They were talking like scientists. I heard conversations like this one:

*"Wow, look at the different color the alcohol makes on the paper compared to the water."*

*"Does yours do that too?"*

*"I wonder if the same thing happens on a different color paper? I think I'll try it."*

I was no longer on center stage. Rather, I moved about the room prodding students with questions they were probably already asking themselves: "Why do you think that happened?" "How can you test that theory?"

For the first time in my science class, everyone wanted to share, to be the featured scientist. We ran out of time to share findings, and children were disappointed. But I was very excited and wrote in my journal that night all about experimenters' workshop and how I could improve it.

As I modified the structure for experimenters' workshop, I kept in mind the elements that made writers' workshop run smoothly. In writers' workshop, I started with mini-lessons that introduced students to everything from story starters to the conventions of capitalization. For experimenters' workshop we had science mini-lessons: lessons on content provided in our science curriculum (i.e. how photosynthesis works); lessons on how to better use scientist's tools, like scales and thermometers; lessons sharing exciting stories behind discoveries; lessons about current puzzles in science, such as how life began.

Next came experimenting time and writing time. I provided materials based on the content area we were studying. For example, when we studied heat energy, I supplied ice. When we studied plants, I brought seeds, flowers and leaves. I tried to find cheap items and encouraged students to use creative materials: heat from their bodies during our study of heat, leaves they themselves had collected as we studied plants. The class was told to use the materials to learn about the subject we were studying, but the rest was up to them. Sometimes I would pose a specific problem for the whole class. I'd ask, for instance, "Which is denser, vinegar or water?" and let them create different experiments to find out.

When children wanted to meet with me, they signed up on the chalkboard. They usually wanted to show me something. If I saw something creative, I'd say, "You really ought to publish that. The class will love it." In

order to publish their findings, the students must write about what they did, what happened, and why they think it happened. I also wanted students to assess the chances that their speculation was, in fact, correct.

They were then expected to hire a content editor to comment on their work, and if they wanted to present as a featured scientist — a role similar to the featured author in writers' workshop — they were required to hand in a checklist certifying they had completed all the necessary steps.

Featured scientists received feedback on their work, both strengths and suggestions. Recently, one featured scientist, Jessica, presented her experiment to discover whether vinegar or oil was denser. As the room settled, she began reading her paper while standing behind a desk on which were placed bags of oil and vinegar and a scale.

## TWO WORKSHOPS COMPARED

### Writers' Workshop

1. In order to learn to write, you must actually write.
2. Authors need to design their own pieces according to their own interests and experiences.
3. The purpose of teaching writing goes beyond preparing certain students to be published authors as adults. All children and adults grow from the joy of sharing their messages through their writing.
4. Children need to recognize themselves as authors.
5. Although the process of writing can be sorted into clear steps, these steps take on individual life with each person and each piece.

### Experimenters' Workshop

1. In order to learn to do science, you must be engaged in the core activities of science: constructing hypotheses, conducting experiments, and sharing findings.
2. Young scientists need to design their own experiments according to their interests and experiences. Young scientists need to learn that they can create their own categories and have the flexibility of thought to see the world in a new way if it is needed.
3. The purpose of science education is not simply to create career scientists. All children and adults benefit from using the core elements of science as a way of gaining knowledge in all areas of life.
4. Children need to recognize themselves as scientists.
5. Although the process of science (the scientific method) can be sorted into clear steps, these steps take on individual life with each person and each spark of curiosity.



### ***Vinegar Is the Key***

*My experiment shows that vinegar is more dense. I have complete confidence in my experiment because I was as accurate as I could be.*

### ***What I Did***

*To prove that vinegar is more dense I did an experiment. I put some vinegar into a plastic bag. Then I put the exact same amount of oil in another plastic bag the same size. Then I put both bags on the scale in our classroom.*

### ***What I Observed***

*When I put the bags on the scale the side with the vinegar automatically dropped. That shows that vinegar is more dense.*

Then Jessica put the bags on the scale, demonstrating what she had just reported.

Hands shot up. As with writers' workshop, students have been encouraged to make positive comments: "I like the way you made up your experiment," one student said, "I think that was a good test."

"It was clear and easy to understand," said another.

Other students had questions. "What if the scale is just wrong?" one asked.

Jessica said, "No, I thought it was at first, so I tried it on two different scales. Look." And she was off to the back of the room to grab another scale to weigh it again for the class.

"Are you sure you put the same amount in each bag?" another student wanted to know.

"Yes, Ms. Stuart was there when I measured it, weren't you?" said Jessica.

When Jessica was finished with her presentation, she put her paper in our published science discoveries binder.

Students love to be featured scientists, so sometimes they write quickly and ignore their editors. For instance, when we were studying heat, I made ice cubes and thermometers available to the class. Two students decided to see if they could find something to melt ice quickly. At the end of class, they published their

findings called "Which Ice Cube Will Melt First?" They read:

*We have 3 containers. In one container there is just soap. In another container it is water. In the last container it has water and baking soda. We are going to find out which ice cube melts first.*

*After a few minutes...*

- 1) baking soda*
- 2) plain water*
- 3) soap*

They found that the ice cube with the baking soda melted first, then the ice cube with the water and then the ice cube with the soap. That's all there was to it. The students liked this experiment, but because the write-up had been cursory, the questioning was also cursory. I thought this would be a good experiment to take further, so I photocopied the experiment and the next day asked all students to try the same experiment to see if it turned out the same.

At the end of class, many students were racing to find editors eager to publish their findings which differed from the results of the original experiment.

Two students published a write-up called "Ice":

*We did the same experiment, but we did things more correct. First of all we made sure that each ice cube was exactly the same size. Second of all we put the same amount of everything so that there wouldn't be more baking soda etc. We put baking soda in first, then soap, then water. Answer: The ice with the water melted first. The ice with the soap melted second. The ice with the baking soda melted third.*

*List (to make sure you do it right)*

- 1) You have to have the same size ice cubes.*
- 2) You have to have the same amount of water, soap, and baking soda.*
- 3) You have to have the same size containers.*
- 4) The ice cubes have to be the same temperature.*
- 5) If one container has a top, all the containers have to have a top. If one container doesn't have a top, all the containers have to not have a top.*

6) *One container can't be closer to the window than the others.*

7) *Don't do anything to one and not all, like mixing.*

Not all students had the same results although, surprisingly, water melted the ice first overall. After this presentation, the whole class started to pay more attention to variables, although they didn't yet use the word. Neither had my brother and I when, at about their age, we were arguing about the "fastest" route to the store and yelling, "Yeah, well maybe you just run faster." And, like my brother and I, students began to struggle with the uncertainty of what they discovered. They began to realize all the things that can go wrong. Fewer announced, as had Jessica, "I have complete confidence in my experiment because I was as accurate as I could be." More papers were ending with conclusions like:

*Yes we are pretty sure [of our theory]. But not really sure. We could do many other experiments to be more sure.*

I thought back on a comment a student had made when, a couple of years earlier, I had encouraged students to use a certain hands-on science book to try some experiments over the summer: "If you know exactly how the experiment is supposed to turn out, what is the point of doing it?" Now, like working scientists, my students are not sure how their experiments are going to turn out, and they find that process thrilling.

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***Now, like working scientists, my students are not sure how their experiments are going to turn out, and they find that process thrilling.***

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This year, although we spent less time going over formal content such as density or photosynthesis, their working knowledge of basic content seems far stronger than it did last year. The students use science vocabulary frequently when they write and have numerous occasions to use content to devise theories explaining why things happen. I have a much clearer insight into their understanding of concepts.

I learned from my experience with writers' workshop that school writing does not need to be divided into so many little parts that what students do no longer resembles the art of writing. When I applied the concepts of writers' workshop to science, I found a way to present science so it would not be diced into narrow activities that rob students of the joy of asking, "What will happen if I try this?" and then embarking on a journey of experiment and explanation to find out.

Now when I ask my students to complete the statement "Science is...", the responses are dramatically different than they were a year ago:

*Science is finding a problem and figuring out a way to solve it and then trying to solve it and seeing if it works.*

*To me it is trying to find out different things. You do experiments every single day. Sometimes you don't even know it. If you don't experiment that means you never try new foods, clothes, hair styles and you just don't try any new things at all.*

*Science is like jumping higher and higher until you find the things you were looking for.*

*Science is like being surrounded by many doors. Each door is a different experiment with a different answer. It all depends on which door you pick.*

*Alexa Stuart is a fourth grade teacher at Sacred Heart School, San Francisco, CA.*

# Books

## Teaching Grammar in Context

by CONSTANCE WEAVER

Portsmouth, NH  
Boynton/Cook, 1996.



Reviewed by  
BILL LYONS

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Since the 1963 publication of *Research in Written Composition* by Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones and Lowell Schoer (NCTE), teachers of writers have wondered how much grammar to teach or whether to teach grammar at all. Remember this famous paragraph? "In view of the widespread agreement of research studies based upon many types of students and teachers, the conclusion can be stated in strong and unqualified terms: The teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in actual composition, even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing."

Now comes Constance Weaver, following up her *Grammar for Teachers* (NCTE, 1979) with *Teaching Grammar in Context*. Weaver suggests teaching those aspects of grammar that are most relevant to writing, but teaching less grammar than we once did, focusing our use of grammar as a tool to support writing growth and setting aside as much time for actual writing as possible.

Indeed, writing — the generation of language, revision and editing — is the central focus of the book. Developing writers, she insists, should not be overloaded with grammar terminology. Teachers are sometimes eager to ladle out more arcane language expertise than students need or can get a hold on. This is not a recipe for inspiring a love of language. I recall a parallel case involving one of my sons as a young, fledgling

stamp collector. He was investigating a beginner's stamp collection notebook and received a gift that overwhelmed him: a three-inch-thick stamp notebook, the kind experts use. He soon lost interest in stamp collecting, just as many students confronted with grammar books that must appear to them three inches thick give up on ever learning much about correctness.

Here is Weaver's basic position: "Students can learn and apply many grammatical concepts without learning to analyze and label the parts of speech and various other grammatical constructions. While this recognition does not solve all problems in teaching grammar, it can certainly be a starting point for experimenting with other approaches to teaching those aspects of grammar that are most relevant to writing."

Teachers should not, however, conclude from Weaver's common sense approach that they need not know grammar. Teachers, she believes, should know as much about language as possible in order to help individual students understand, as needed, grammatical concepts. She points to Lucy Caulkins' and Nancie Atwell's mini-lessons as good ways to share knowledge without requiring that young writers go through the behaviorist practice-and-be-tested hoops. Such lessons may work with the many students who find grammar palatable only in small doses.

*Teaching Grammar in Context*, however, is not primarily a

"how-to" book. Rather, it presents an overview of issues related to teaching grammar. Because of this focus, the book might be particularly useful in settings such as English education methods classes or staff inservice sessions. Group discussions of this book could very well motivate teachers to share strategies for teaching grammar in context.

Chapter 1 offers definitions of the term "grammar," including the fundamental sense of grammar as "the unconscious command of syntax that enables us to understand and speak the language." Grammar in this sense need not be taught, since it is what we learn as we acquire language. Chapter 1 also gives a historical perspective on traditional school grammar, originally taught to (1) discipline the mind and (2) teach socially prestigious forms that sometimes offered the middle and upper classes "an excuse for considering themselves superior to others." In the eighteenth century, Weaver notes, prescriptions for English were based on descriptions of Latin, whether they were relevant to English or not. The rule about not ending a sentence with a preposition comes from Latin. "This literally can't be done in Latin so it shouldn't be done in English," the eighteenth century grammarians reasoned. The grammarians might have done well to listen to another Latin speaker, the ancient Roman Quintilian, who believed that "standards for usage should be based on the current usage of the educated."

Early chapters of the book consider research data related to

the teaching of grammar. For example, Weaver explores such questions as "How is language acquired?" and "Are errors evidence of growth?" With the support of research, Weaver, in a play on the popular "scope and sequence" charts produced by textbook publishers, advocates scope but not sequence. For example, a kindergartner using dialogue is in a position to learn quotation marks, while an adult may need review of many such conventions. Thus, a particular skill may be taught at a variety of levels.

Weaver writes:

*...We teachers cannot realistically hope to sequence what aspects of grammar should be taught. It simply won't work... Thus — it bears repeating — there cannot be any sensible scope and sequence to tell us what to teach when, with regard to revising and editing. As teachers, we simply have to be knowledgeable enough about developmental trends to have some ideas when and how to intervene with particular students — and this means being sensitive to their feelings about their writing and themselves as writers too.*

Key to much of Weaver's discussion is Noam Chomsky's distinction between "surface structure" and "deep structure" — the grammar that allows us to comprehend and produce language. This leads her to review some of the unconscious learning we do as we acquire the grammatical structure of English. For example, we come to understand without

acquiring the terminology that a "have" auxiliary is always followed by a past participle ("She has left her job") while a "be" auxiliary is always followed by a present participle ("Jerry will be taking over her job").

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### ***Teachers ... should know as much about language as possible in order to help individual students***

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Weaver acknowledges that we don't know "how children acquire grammatical competence in their native language. We can only extract the patterns from recorded utterances and formulate rules that would account for those utterances." After analyzing children's early speech, she concludes, "Considering just the surface structure, such learning might appear to proceed from part to whole. But viewed from the deeper, underlying structure, it is just the opposite: First comes the whole, the underlying propositions, and then gradually comes an ability to represent the parts that reflect and convey that whole." Anyone who has acquired language, she says, *does* know what a sentence is, and reading miscues (Ken Goodman's term) demonstrate that intuitive sense of grammar.

Second languages are best acquired in much the same way as the first, Weaver observes: through immersion in using the language. She refers to the work of Stephen Krashen who contrasts



language learning (formally studying a language) with *language acquisition*, learning to communicate naturally without formal instruction. To oversimplify, Krashen says we acquire language through *comprehensible input* — taking in language we don't understand within a context that makes it understandable. Weaver also discusses the research of Warwick Elley, who concluded that direct teaching of grammar is not necessary for acquiring the basic structure of a second language any more than for acquiring one's native language. Since small children are not worried about being perfect, they are inclined to play with language. This helps account for their ready acquisition of language. "Unless an adult intervenes punitively, young children will just naturally take risks in using language; they are uninhibited by fear of failure, punishment, or embarrassment." This lack of inhibition underlies children's willingness to try invented or constructed spelling.

Weaver's thinking relies on the case she makes for the constructivist or transitional model of learning, the view that learners make their own meaning based upon their background knowledge, experiences, and purposes. This model she contrasts with the reductionist or transmission model, one in which the teacher — the possessor of ready-made knowledge — delivers information to the students. As Weaver discusses these two positions, she treats us to a review of the work of many years of thinking about these issues, citing theorists from Edward Thorndike to Madeline

Hunter, from Brian Cambourne to Jerome Bruner.

In support of constructivism, she discusses research that shows "by the end of first grade, children encouraged to spell as best they can score as well or better on standardized tests of spelling than children who are asked to write using only the words they can spell correctly. In addition, they seem to develop a better grasp of phonics, to use a much wider range of vocabulary, and of course to write as well."

Weaver recalls an important sentence from *Grammar for Teachers*: "There seems to be little value in marking students' papers with 'corrections,' little value in teaching the conventions of mechanics apart from actual writing, and even less value in teaching grammar in order to instill these conventions." This conclusion leads Weaver to observe that the teacher needs sometimes to serve as an editor rather than a critic or judge. In this view, she echoes James Britton's "teacher as learning colleague" idea and Peter Elbow's vision of the teacher helping the writer meet the standards of the "gatekeepers."

She also makes clear that the gatekeepers are not all that watchful. She notes that published writers occasionally use comma splices, such as in John Steinbeck's summary sentence: "They clambered up the grass, they clutched at each other, little ones rode on big ones." And she looks at what Kline and Memering called "minor sentences," sentences such as "How convenient!"

From Weaver's book we can draw some guidelines which teachers at all levels can apply. Some of her suggestions are:

- engage students in writing across the curriculum
- read good literature
- teach grammar in context using a minimum of terminology
- offer grammar electives
- follow up on mini-lessons with students who exhibit both the need and readiness for a particular skill.

Is there some concluding advice that teachers will be able to take away from *Teaching Grammar in Context*? If there is, I would put it this way: Teachers need to know grammar, process writing, developmental trends and individual learners. They need to be able to use grammar, when appropriate, to help writers improve their writing, especially their revising and editing.

What a reasonable idea, especially for someone like me who began teaching using Warriner's *Grammar and Composition* and who, about the time he was becoming expert at diagramming sentences, virtually stopped using grammar terms altogether. Weaver sets the stage for a second look at grammar as a tool for writers, and I find myself parting the curtains.

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# "Our Wal-Mart Is Bigger Than Our Mall": Writing That Matters

by

SUZANNE STYRON EDWARDS



The best school writing is real writing. When I plunged back into my classroom after a summer with the West Tennessee Writing Project, I brought this idea with me. By real writing, I mean writing that has an audience outside the classroom. Typically, I want my students to write about themselves or an issue that genuinely concerns them and then send their work off beyond the school room to a literary magazine, a newspaper, a politician, an author. But, of course, the opportunities for real writing, while theoretically limitless, sometimes wear a bit thin. We want our students to write about their concerns, not look around for something to be concerned about so that they can write.

That's why my students at Dyersburg High School and I owe a special debt of gratitude to Mr. Ken Mink. It was Mr. Mink who — in his innocence — riled us up to do some *real* writing.

Mink, who is managing editor of the Harrisonburg Virginia *Daily Record*, had written an opinion column about the 50 worst places to live in America, and there we were — Dyersburg — Number 38. Actually, Mink did not have a lot to say about Dyersburg or any of the other 49 places on his list. After all, this was a newspaper column, not a book-length guide about places to avoid.

Mink wrote that Dyersburg was "too far from Memphis, too far from St. Louis, too far from anything but cornfields and catfish."

When our local newspaper contacted Mink to ask him what had motivated this outburst of bile toward our community, he managed to dig himself in deeper. It turns out his knowledge of Dyersburg was based on

his experiences "passing through": "I lived in Kentucky and went to Arkansas State University in Jonesboro, so I've been through Dyersburg many times," Mr. Mink said. He insisted his column was written "tongue in cheek ... a spoof of the *Money* magazine list for trying to pick the 100 best places to live when there are thousands of good places to live in this country."

Whatever Mr. Mink's motivation, my first reaction to his article was one of indignation. Why did he feel a need to pick on Dyersburg, just a typical, small southern town with a population of about 17,000? But my indignation quickly turned to excitement when I realized Mink had presented my seniors with a chance to do some real writing. These students typically fall into two categories: those who despise their hometown and those who defend it. Regardless of which camp they were in, students were going to have a chance to write on a subject they cared about.

We keep journals in which we write a few times weekly, and as a prompt for journal writing I asked students to respond to Mink, offering reasons why they agreed or disagreed with him. When time was called, many students did not want to stop writing. There was so much enthusiasm for the topic that we decided we would respond to Mink personally. In groups of four and five, students composed replies. I gave them only one direction: Whatever position you take, make sure you develop reasons for your opinion.

With no more preparation than this, students managed to draw on many of the classic techniques of argument.

1. Some adopted a moderate, reasonable tone, contrasting with Mink's flippancy:

*Every town has its flaws and Dyersburg is no exception. But our strengths over-ride our weaknesses. Dyersburg is just a really pleasant southern town where one can walk down the street and not worry about being shot or mugged.*

2. Some questioned Mink's expertise on the subject of Dyersburg:

*We think you should find out more about Dyersburg before you say it is one of the 50 worst cities to live in.*

*Mr. Mink, you were only passing through Dyersburg and saw the outside of it. We have seen what is important: the hearts of the citizens.*

*If you have any more sarcastic remarks about our town, we suggest you make them after you've lived here a while.*

3. Some supplied pertinent facts which Mink either ignored or did not know:

*Our school, Dyersburg High, is over 20 years old and looks like new.*

*Pollution is not a problem even though we have several large industries. The Wildlife management system has a commendable program in our area.*

*By the way, our high school is ranked among the top 50 in the United States.*

4. One group asked a series of rhetorical questions intended to make Mr. Mink squirm a little:

*Mr. Mink, in your opinion, what makes a town a good place to live? Is it kids killing kids, beer joints, drug abusers, and towns full of hate? If this is your idea of a good town, then we're glad we're not one.*

5. Many added their own rhetorical twist to Mink's words, building his language into their arguments:

*All those cornfields and catfish bring our town a lot of money.*

*...the crime rate is lower than in St. Louis or Memphis. For example, we've never seen a catfish pull a gun on a fisherman or a cornstalk hold a grudge against a farmer.*

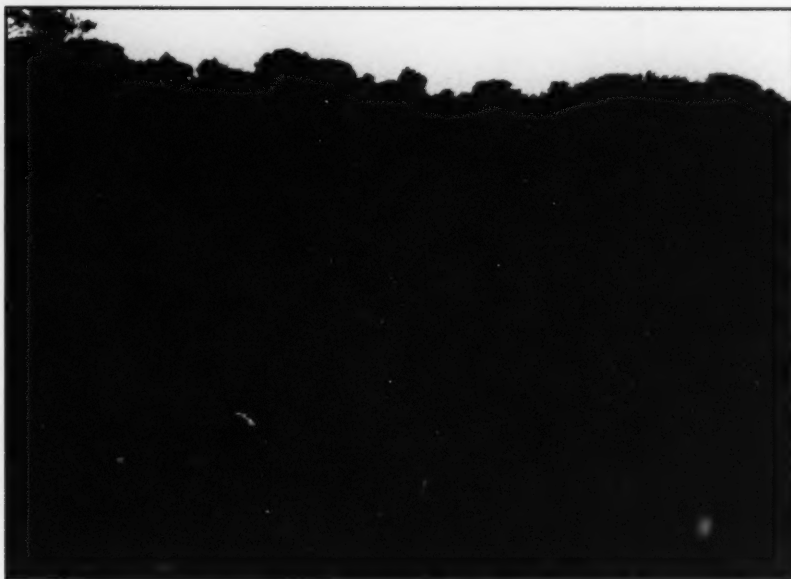
*Mr. Mink where do you think the corn, corn dogs, cornbread and popcorn products that you find in the supermarket come from? That's right — cornfields.*

One interesting letter came from a group of students who claimed to be in agreement with Mink, but because the group partially echoed Mink's "tongue-in-cheek" tone, we are not sure if they are altogether serious:



*We are residents of the "38th Worst Place To Live." We are too close to Frogjump, Tennessee and are too far from Memphis. We also agree catfish has lost its taste and corn fields are burned up from environmental pesticides. Our Wal-Mart is bigger than our Mall. The only youth activities are illegal. Finally Dyersburg is right on top of the epicenter of the New Madrid "Death Zone." We appreciate the fact that you brought the rest of our community to realize what we were trying to get them to.*

We collected the letters and sent them off to Mr. Mink. And then something remarkable happened Mr. Mink wrote back. Not that we had not expected some kind of



*have I, but I don't really watch Letterman every night, so I don't know. ...*

In short, my students and Ken Mink were having a real world conversation, and all parties seemed to be enjoying it thoroughly.

Now, a year later, the dialogue between my students and Mr. Mink is a vivid and inspiring memory for all of us who were involved. Thinking back on the experience, I remain a bit surprised that the great majority of my students came to the defense of their hometown. The activity made them think through their

polite, businesslike "thank you," but Mink's answer went far beyond the requirements of good manners. His answer made clear that he actually had read the letters, and that fact itself made the assignment worthwhile. The students' writing had made a difference. Someone from the "real world" was responding.

Mink made useful suggestions. Writing in response to the comment in one of the letters about the negative effects of small town boredom, he said:

*...Boredom does breed drug use and more casual sex. These comments certainly indicate Dyersburg does need to consider building a teen entertainment center. Kingsport TN, is a good example of how a city recognized such a problem and built a special teen center for recreation, special dances, etc.*

He argued back:

*Kim Dameworth, Kristy McLaughlin, Sam Moore, Christy Wallace and Jeffery Yarboro pointed out that Dyersburg is a safe place with a low crime rate, but then so is Bat Cave, N.C., but it is not much fun to live there.*

He answered our jokes with his jokes:

*I especially enjoyed the comment of Shelly Martin, Mandy Brimm, Nichole Townson, and Levi Morgan [who pointed out that] they had never seen a catfish pull a gun on a fisherman or a cornstalk hold a grudge against a farmer. Neither*

feelings. Early on, shared journal entries and lively class discussion won more students over to being supporters of Dyersburg than detractors. One reason this support for Dyersburg surprised me is that it is much easier for all of us to be negative. Seventeen and eighteen-year-olds, in particular, tend to be hypercritical of anything that has been around longer than they have. Whatever their stance, my students came out of this assignment strongly committed to what they believe.

Also surprising to me was the enthusiasm, even passion, that this assignment generated. In a time when I keenly feel challenged to excite and interest my students, this activity was one that carried far beyond my expectations. When I look back at the ingredients that made this writing work, I find that it had three qualities which blended to give it special power: The topic was current; it was a subject my students knew about and one about which they felt strongly. Timeliness, relevance and passion made this writing work. This is not a brew that presents itself everyday. But next time these elements combine, I will be there.

*A version of this article appeared in the October 1995 Tennessee English Journal.*

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# Real World Feminism:

## A Teacher Learns from Her Students' Writing

by

LISA ORTA



I remember 1992 as the year the Clarence Thomas hearings and the Willie Kennedy Smith and Mike Tyson rape trials gave me an overwhelming feeling of despair. At the time I was teaching high school English in Oakland, California. Oakland is one of the most racially and ethnically integrated cities in the country. There is a large base of middle class African Americans in Oakland, as well as an alarmingly large number of families living below the poverty line. My class rosters that year reflected the broad racial, ethnic, and economic spectrum of Oakland; my students were almost half African American about 30% were white, 10% Asian, 5% Hispanic, and 5% Native American. The debates among my students and arguments in the teachers' lunchroom echoed in my head daily: "Anita Hill? She's a lesbian. Why else would she put a brother through so much?" "He got off because he's a rich, white boy." "She asked for it. All women ask for it." "Any female stands in front of me naked gets what she's asking for."

I heard my students using language I abhorred; it was this year that I learned a "ho" is not a garden tool, and that "bitch" is an accepted salutation in the hallway. I saw girls pregnant at fifteen proudly circulating invitations to baby showers. I saw black eyes and bruises that

I knew came from jealous, possessive boyfriends. I saw girls cat fighting over immature, self-important boys. I saw blurry, tired faces steeped in the release of illegal drugs. Having experienced the height of the women's movement during my high school years in the early 70s, what I saw around me was as foreign as it was devastating. I felt the girls lacked a feminist context through which to understand their lives.

At 15, the age of many of my students, I was growing up in Los Altos, California, a predominately white suburb which later developed into Silicon Valley. There was a complete absence of cultural consciousness in this particular time and place, so the fact that I was the token Jew and the token Mexican due to my parents' "mixed" marriage meant nothing to me. Of paramount importance to me was the burgeoning women's movement. As I navigated the bumpy road from adolescence to young adulthood, feminism presented itself to me as a promise. At first, the hot debates at my high school centered around changes in the dress code — that girls won the right to wear slacks on Fridays was perceived as a significant win, that girls were later allowed to wear slacks on any day and jeans on Fridays felt like a victory on par with accomplishing world peace. Bella Abzug and Gloria Steinem



began educating us about gender inequity and women's rights. Planned Parenthood and *Our Bodies, Ourselves* by the Boston Women's Health Collective began educating us about our bodies and birth control through self-help and low-cost health care. I became the first female editor-in-chief on our high school newspaper and took a leadership role in the ecology club. As a feminist, I felt, I could finally begin to do my part to help save the planet.

What a contrast my teenage experience was to what I saw around me twenty years later in Oakland. These girls no more cared about challenging the grammatically understood "he" than they cared about a sign I demanded be removed from our building that read, "Beat Dem Pussy's" [sic] when our school team, the Titans, prepared to play the rival school's Wildcats on homecoming. "They're just having fun," the male teacher advising student activities protested. From where I stood, sexual harassment didn't look like much fun to me. So it was that in 1992 I decided to turn to classroom-based teacher research as a tool to help me make sense of what felt like utter chaos. For my research (and my personal and professional sanity), I decided to focus on gender identity and the development of girls' healthy self-esteem.

As a way to get insight into their perception of gender identity, I asked my students to begin a 15-minute freewrite with, "If I were a man/woman....," taking the opposite point of view. This assignment was inspired by the following poem my teaching partner and I had put in our students' English Social Studies reader:

**WOMAN!!Mujur!**

by Juana de Ibarbourou

translated by Kate Flores

*If I were a man, in what a wealth of moon,  
of shade and of silence I should revel!  
How night after night, I should merely wander  
through quiet fields and along the shores of the sea!*

*If I were a man, what a strange, what a mad,  
inveterate vagabond I should be!  
Friend of all the meandering roadways that beckon  
one to go far away,  
never to return!*

*When thus besieged by the need to roam  
how painful it is to be a woman!*

While the students wrote, I asked myself, "What if I were a man? I wonder if I would have chosen the job of teaching literacy to so many disillusioned and disenfranchised young people?" I imagined myself as a man and saw myself sequestered in a glamorous writing studio, writing, uninterrupted by my children or spouse; I saw myself as an influential publisher, sitting in a corner office with a window, barking messages through the intercom at my secretary. Discouraged and humbled by the sex-role stereotypes that were flying in my face like a fleet of Mac trucks, I tried to imagine what I would write if I were doing this assignment as a high school student twenty years ago. Remembering myself as a teenager, I guessed I would write, "If I were a man, I would be a scientist or a politician or a journalist. I would travel to Europe and be unafraid to hitchhike or accept free offers of places to stay. I would be attached to women who were strong and intelligent, and I would listen to what they had to say. Really listen. My parents would encourage my independence and be proud of my accomplishments." This made me even more curious about what my students were writing about. I looked around the classroom and saw the most cynical and the most reluctant students scribbling in their notebooks. Perhaps I had hit a chord.

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*My hope was that the bra-burnings and demonstrations, the affirmative action policies and sexual harassment prohibitions, the equity legislation such as California's Title IX, had in some way filtered down to a feminist consciousness in at least some of my students.*

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Ages 15 to 19, my students were born between 1973 and 1977; their parents were young adults during the American feminist political movement which tried so hard to change notions set in the 50s and 60s of what men and women could be to each other and to the world. My hope was that the bra-burnings and demonstrations, the affirmative action policies and sexual harassment prohibitions, the equity legislation such as California's Title IX, had in some way filtered down to a feminist consciousness in at least some of my



**WOMAN** MAN  
 WOMAN **MAN**  
**MAN** WOMAN  
 MAN **WOMAN**  
**WOMAN** MAN  
 WOMAN **MAN**  
**MAN** WOMAN  
 MAN **WOMAN**  
**WOMAN** MAN

students. After 15 minutes I told the students to stop writing and called for volunteers to read, and as they shared their freewrites with the class, the dark cloud of frustration hanging over my head grew denser. Hands down, the girls expressed great interest in being dominant, self-assured womanizing men. None of the girls expressed Ibarbourou's yearning for the kind of freedom that affords adventure and leads to self-fulfillment. The boys felt that as women they would be vulnerable to physical and psychological pain, and that they would be obsessed with their looks. Thinking about themselves as men gave the girls feelings of possibility; thinking about themselves as women made the boys feel victimized.

We went on to read and discuss the poem. Students easily understood Ibarbourou's message that women are shackled to their duties and responsibilities and are not free to roam, as opposed to men who may wander (and, if they so desire, leave) at will. "Yes," students said, appreciating the cross-cultural similarities, "that sure is how it is for us too. Women have to stay put because they have to take care of the

babies. Men can up and leave any time they like, and go wherever they please, but women have to stay home with the children." Although students seemed to fully understand the meaning of the poem, they had no interest in a deeper analysis of gender roles in their lives. There was no willingness or interest in challenging the usefulness or advisability of social conventions which assign women the role of homemaker and child-raiser and allow men the freedom to roam at will. I collected the student writing and prepared myself to see the truth. What was the feminist consciousness level of my students? Did all the girls perceive boys as unfaithful, abusive and irresponsible? Did all the boys feel girls were in great physical and emotional danger? And the bigger questions: Were students writing about their lives and the lives of those around them? Were these wishes or fears? Dreams or nightmares?

In categorizing the girls' writing, I saw that they did three things: They created themselves as the dream man, the man to whom they would be attracted; they identified and showed a longing for male privilege; and they defined the negative aspects of contemporary men.

First, the perfect man would be physically attractive:

*I would lift weights not so I can look like a body builder, but enough so I will look firm. I'll have a nice chest back, stomach legs, and [be] very well endowed.*

*I would be tall about 6'2" with black hair and black eyes, or maybe hazel. I would go to school and work out at the gym with all my buddies. I would drive a red convertible Corvette with major boom — why not?*

These girls were very clear on the physical attributes of the boys to whom they were attracted.

Next, the ideal man would provide well for his family:

*I would also take care of my responsibilities, for example family, medical care, house, utilities, look forward to major investments.*

*My only worry would be to supply my family and I would do really good because by that time my life would be very controlled and situated.*

*[Men] are expected to generally make more money only to support their women and children.*

The girls envisioned themselves as responsible males, committed to working hard, earning money and supporting their families. While a small number of girls in this sample actually lived a nuclear family, the fantasy of such a family — a wife, husband and their children — was strongly emphasized. Intelligence and academic success were qualities missing from these “dream” men. These attributes were never mentioned. Girls saw themselves as men who had the skills and drive to obtain and maintain employment, but there was no concern for intellect or career choice. “If I were a man,” wrote a straight-A female student, “I don’t think my grades would be the same.” The ideal man would leave in the morning, go somewhere, and come home with a healthy-sized paycheck which he would then dedicate exclusively to his family. “I would have to mow the lawns, fix my car, and be the head of the house,” wrote a Hispanic girl.

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***Intelligence and academic success were qualities missing from these “dream” men. These attributes were never mentioned.***

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The girls were very clear about how they would treat women if they were men. Here they seemed to measure the ideal man against the men they knew:

*If I were a man, I would treat my girlfriend really good. I wouldn’t try to be so macho.*

*If I had sisters or a girlfriend I would have the utmost respect for girls and not ever lay a hand on them.*

That the ideal man was physically attractive, a good provider and respectful towards women seemed fair, and a little encouraging. That he was so one-dimensional, though, was a little troubling to me. When girls considered the privileges of being male, they seemed aware of the social and professional freedoms that would be theirs. Girls imagined themselves escaping stereotypes and restrictions put on them by external definitions of femaleness and femininity, and again, the primary emphasis was on looks.

An attractive African American girl with long hair wrote:

*I could buy all the men’s fashions from Ralph Lauren and I could finally have short hair without being called bald headed.*

The star of our girls’ basketball team:

*I would have the best haircuts because I would do it myself every other day. I would have the best wardrobe and a hundred pairs of shoes, I would be well built and very strong.*

As boys, girls envisioned liberation from the stereotypical media model of what women should look like; as boys, girls would have more freedom to express a unique and personal style. This surprised me because given the ethnic and cultural diversity of our school, my perception was that girls at our school did not imitate a singular teenager “look” in their choice of hairstyle and dress. The danger expressed here is that the girls are already trapped in a perceived mold of what they can and cannot be, juxtaposed with the perception that boys can create their own individual style and thereby, perhaps, their own lives.

Girls also envied what they perceived to be the superior athletic ability of boys. As boys, girls felt they would have the bodies and minds to play sports seriously:

*If I were a man I would play professional basketball because when girls play they look like gladiators trying to win a battle.*

Our basketball star writes:

*If I were a man I would be 6’5”, I would be the greatest player in the NBA and have the most money.*

One Asian girl thought that if she were a boy she “would be able to enjoy sports as well and play them in a better and understanding manner.” Another girl commented that the first thing she would do would be to “try out for all the professional sports that only men are allowed to do (i.e. baseball, football, hockey, etc.).”

The girls expressed interest in sports, yet they felt their gender identity kept them from playing sports seriously. This unrequited yearning for playing the “serious” sports, and for being taken seriously as

athletes, reflects the way a lot of American women feel about athletics. As a skilled and/or professional athlete, a woman is somehow defeminized. The great talent of African American athlete Florence Griffith Joiner seemed to popularize bewitching fingernails more than it did running track. The girls saw physical strength and accessibility to professional sports as keys to masculine privilege. Masculinity was also seen as the key to courage. An Asian girl wrote, "I would like to have more muscle to be a man. If I were a man I would not be afraid of thunder sound, being alone at night or just being in a dark room by myself, to sleep by myself."

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***An Asian girl wrote, "I would like to have more muscle to be a man.***

***If I were a man I would not be afraid of thunder sound, being alone at night or just being in a dark room by myself, to sleep by myself."***

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Men were also envied for their perceived success, their status as business leaders and political figures in American society:

*If I was a man, I would be taken more seriously because I'm demanding and I'm a leader and not a follower and some people don't see women as leaders. I would have a stronger chance of running for mayor or president.*

*Men seem to have it easier in this world when it comes to politics, jobs and positions of authority. After all, there's only one woman on the Supreme Court, and it must have taken a lot of hard work for her to get that far.*

These imaginings were very sophisticated in their accuracy and cynicism. The girls saw that even though Oakland's mayor is African American, modeling political opportunity for African American and other minority youth, their gender would limit their access to political and professional authority. While there are now many more women in positions of leadership than there were in the years when I was becoming a feminist, these girls still viewed the upper echelons of business and politics as a man's world.

Girls also believed that men had the privilege of making life choices independent of social conventions and concerns for physical safety. A Greek girl whose family dictated that she either choose a "feminine" career or go to Greece and marry a man chosen for her by her family writes from her masculine perspective:

*Marriage, why should I ever get married young? I'll probably get married around 30 or 35 to some young girl in her mid or early twenties I wouldn't have to worry about cooking or cleaning or taking care of my children or even having them. My wife would take all these responsibilities. After high school I would probably join the armed forces and then continue with being a policeman. That line of work just seems fascinating and interesting. ... If only I were a man, I wouldn't have to worry over money in my family because I would inherit everything father owns, not like my sisters who have to either work or marry someone with money.*

Others fantasized about physical freedom:

*If I were a man my parents wouldn't have put me on a curfew. If I were a man they wouldn't ask me where I'm going and when will I be back. If I were a man my father would let me drive his Porche.*

*If you're a guy rather than a girl your parents would treat you different like for instance if I asked to walk to the store at night if I was a guy my mother wouldn't trip but if I was a girl she would say no. All parents, no matter what, with girls they are going to watch out for them more.*

The yearning for freedom is a universal teenage emotion, but the girls perceived themselves getting far less of it than boys. We know that women are at much greater risk of the threat of violence than men, and that the concerns of these girls' families are loving and realistic, but it is important to see that girls felt imprisoned by these restrictions. Again, the quest for personal identity was conferred by gender identity.

Lastly, the girls were very poignant in defining the negative aspects of contemporary men. Infidelity, violence and insensitivity were strong themes:

*If I were a man I would have a lot of girlfriends and cheat on all of them just to see what it feels like to be unfaithful.*

*If I were a man I would most likely be fighting all the time. I would feel couldn't no other man beat me and I am the best looking. I'd always be after the ladies and have the freshest car to help pull 'em.*

*I would probably be in a gang hanging out on the streets.*

Physical violence, arrogance, and distance from emotions are seen as masculine traits to be admired here. As men, the girls would merely have to reach out and grab what they wanted. And the perception is it's all there for the taking.

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As a man, Ibarbourou claims she would enjoy the richness and solitude of nature. She would travel unencumbered, a rootless vagabond following her own impulse to roam. Ibarbourou bemoans the fact that woman cannot "go far away, never to return," and this restriction on our freedom, she says, makes it "painful to be a woman." These girls were defining a different kind of freedom. To be sure, it is a 90s freedom to imagine walking to the store alone at night, getting a job as a law enforcement officer, driving dad's Porsche, sleeping around, joining a gang. While these yearnings reflect the urban reality the girls in my classes lived, they are devoid of the innocence and abandon of Ibarbourou's poem. As I see it, these are negative freedoms, pointing to the pain and frustration of being trapped in a gender identity that allows for little creativity or promise. They seemed spiteful and in some cases self-hating. As men, the girls looked forward to the opportunity to burden other women with the pain that had burdened them.

While the girls expressed a lot of envy of male privilege, the boys seemed confused and intrigued by their perceptions of themselves as women. Boys in this sample expressed disdain, fear and some sympathy for what they viewed as the female role. In categorizing the boys' writing, I saw that they did four things: They grappled with the notion that women can "have

it all"; they advised girls to be more like men; they expressed fear and repulsion of female body functions; and they fantasized about what the perfect woman would look like.

First, in attempting to imagine themselves as women, the boys saw themselves having more depth and complexity. As women, some of the boys felt they could have it all. One Asian boy who was shy and well-liked by his peers wrote:

*If I were a woman I be proud and strong. I be a kind of woman to stand up to any conflict in life. I would be a strong and kind woman. I would also feel the pain of being a woman. I would feel the ups and downs of being a woman. I would feel the joy of being a woman. If I were a woman I be a little of everything.*

Others wrote:

*I would have a lot of money, take care of business first, then comes pleasure. My hair would be long and black. I would have a world class figure, I would have green eyes.*

*If I was a woman I would dress in 60s clothing. I would also want to be a Super Porno Star. I would listen to updated music and work. I would want to have 2 kids and a big white house with a picket fence.*

There is a tone of envy here which could easily stem from the trouble boys have at this age with identifying and expressing emotion. As women boys felt they could be physically attractive, financially successful, and emotionally strong. But the tone also idealizes and possibly demeans the fantasy of femininity. For most women, having it all doesn't mean being a "Super Porno Star" while living in a big house with children and a picket fence.

Second, boys expressed a strong interest in showing girls how to be girls, and much of this advice centered around how girls should really be more like boys:

*If I were a woman I would want a man's mentality and intuition. I would be a very intelligent woman and I would be the leader of some major company.*

*My career interest would be in business, so I could start my own. Some things would be hard to be a woman. First off, I'd have to get used to monthly*



attitudes. Then I'd have to learn to deal with guys and their stupid games.

An African American boy who lived in perpetual motion with his mother, moving from one apartment or house to another, wrote:

*I would take self-defense classes so I wouldn't get raped. I wouldn't get married because I don't want to get hurt. I would carry a small pistol in my purse. I wouldn't let anyone tell me what to do.*

Others wrote:

*I would try to date as many men as I could. I would only fool with men who have lots of money. I would be the finest woman in Oakland. I wouldn't be sexually active.*

*If I were a woman, I would have to watch my back because there might be a horny perverted male out there just waiting to harass me.*

The fear of emotional intimacy here is remarkable as is the advice on how to avoid it. Boys advise girls to be professionally and physically strong, but emotionally wary. The fear of physical attack is also very close to the surface. As though they are the ones who put the girls in danger, the boys advise girls of ways they can fight the boys off — be equipped with knowledge of self-defense, be armed, remain independent and chaste.

Third, the boys were aware to the point of obsession of female physical functions:

*One thing I would definitely hate are all of the natural occurrences that accompany being a female.*

*The number one reason I don't want to be a woman is having a baby. Having a baby is a very hard and difficult thing to go through. Nine months of having something inside you. Too much pain.*

*If I was a woman I don't think I could handle the struggles of a woman such as getting pregnant, dealing with our society and being a woman and being on my period. I heard this is the most stressful time of most woman, and I do not think I am strong enough to handle these problems. Being a woman is very hard, that's why I'll be better off as a man.*

It is in this dimension of femininity that boys sincerely envy women their strength. Here, fear of "having someone inside you" extends from the emotional arena to the physical. It was heartening to observe the respect the boys expressed for women's ability to create life, but instead of wonderment at this miracle of nature the boys seemed much more repulsed and distanced by it. Developmentally, although several of my students (boys and girls alike) were already parents, boys at this age want nothing to do with the actual experience of menstruation and pregnancy. It was the only category in which the girls' strength was fully acknowledged by the boys.

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***Most boys had no trouble romanticizing what their ideal woman would look like, and she sounded a lot like Barbie...***

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Both the girls and boys had definite views on what makes a member of the opposite sex physically attractive, and this formula for attractiveness seemed to cross all cultural and ethnic lines:

*I really cannot imagine myself as a woman. But if I was I would be about 6 feet tall with a figure of 32-22-32. I would be very famous like Whitney Houston.*

*If I were a woman I would be tall, skinny with long hair, fake fingernails and other things. If I were a woman I'd wear beautiful dresses with stocking and high heel. I would expect my boyfriend to treat me as if I were a queen and the most beautiful woman in the world.*

Most boys had no trouble romanticizing what their ideal woman would look like, and she sounded a lot like Barbie and those fake Disney images to me. Some perceptions, however, were more negative than idealized. An African American boy who lived with his mother, a professional woman who worked as a loan officer in a local credit union, wrote:

*If I were a woman I'd keep myself up, unlike most women who are smelly and don't have any care about themselves.*



From a Samoan boy who maintained a "tough" image and rarely participated in class or did his homework:

*If I were a woman I would cry. Like they worry too much about how they look and they take too much time to put on make-up. I think if I was a girl I would be a prostitute selling my body for money. I might be a crack addict and throw my life away.*

These boys were clear: The pessimism and anger expressed here is a distancing device from all things female.

This data led me to raise several questions. Why did the girls ignore their strengths? Why, for instance, didn't any of the girls mention what they would learn or gain from women if they were men? Why did the boys bring male attributes to their images of women, attributes such as making money, keeping people at a distance, carrying a pistol? Where did the girls learn to long for 'boys' qualities? Why are the qualities labeled as masculine labeled that way? It seemed that girls wanted to be boys for the advantages they have; boys reluctantly became girls because they know that as girls they would have "none of the gain and all of the pain."

Informed by my students' writing, I began to pay closer attention to how my feminist views had skewed the ways I saw my students. I observed that feminism is a delicate topic among them. There wasn't much in the media and in their real-life experiences that showed them that women could be strong physically and intellectually without losing their femininity or that men could express emotions and insecurities without risking their masculine image. There was no willingness or interest in challenging the usefulness or advisability of social conventions which assign women the role of homemaker and child-raiser and allow men the freedom to roam at will. It became important for me to acknowledge that many of the privileges girls see given to men are culturally, economically and religiously prescribed, and many of these gender-related privileges promise what my students didn't have — security, predictability, confidence, hope. My original position now seemed dogmatic and short-sighted. I saw more clearly that I had expected everyone to subscribe to my brand of feminism and that I had ignored layers of societal pressures and personal longings which influence the perspectives of students and teachers alike.

After teaching high school, I went on to teach a fifth grade writing workshop, and then to my present job of teaching English at a California community college. In every classroom I now begin the semester with the writing prompt, "If I were a man/If I were a woman..." I started my research with the conviction that we as teachers must help girls grow strong, to show them that they don't have to accept vulgar salutations in the hallway, and to encourage them to reject belief systems which endorse any kind of oppression, including sexism. It is most gratifying, in my present job, to see so many women come to school with the intention of creating a better life for themselves through education. It is possibly even more gratifying to see the male students learning to help their female peers by developing an awareness of the need for gender equity. If I were a man, it is my hope that I would be teaching exactly the same lesson — and feel just as hopeful doing it.

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# The Perils and Pleasures of Teacher Research:

## Excerpts from a Journal I Never Kept

by

MARTHA DUDLEY



**Labor Day:** That golden moment when all seems possible. Classroom ready, welcoming, pristine; grade-book with names entered neatly, and a positive feeling toward each one (never mind that I haven't actually laid eyes on any of the students represented by those names); energy abundant; plans for the year — well, not exactly complete, but I do have the first week sketched out. This is the year of the orderly progression, each week building on the last, everything balanced. I won't start sentence combining and then not get back to it until three weeks later. And I won't do literature responses but never get around to reviewing the elements of a story. I'll respond perceptively to my students' writing and get those papers back to them before the next essay. And this is the year for classroom research. I'll define my question early, write in my research journal daily, and gain some useful insights. Perhaps the question will be, "What activities bring about real revision?"

**September 16:** I feel that my 15 years of teaching have failed to prepare me for these past two weeks. My plans are mocking me. Research on revision seems an unlikely prospect. Far too many of my students, more than in any other year, cannot read or write on anything approaching the seventh-grade level. Most frustrating are the behaviors that have confounded my efforts to get a year of learning underway. My students seem to be at the mercy of every impulse: They shout things out, ridicule each other, literally fall out of their chairs, and trample one another getting in and out of the classroom. Of course, if this description characterized every single student, my tasks would be simpler; not easier, perhaps,

but simpler. But in addition to the students that fit that description, I have the quiet, earnest students who are ready to learn and somewhat prepared to work on the reading and writing tasks of seventh grade, and a few students whose abilities and achievements far surpass my expectations. How can I possibly think of doing classroom research in this situation?

**September 30:** Somehow, things have gotten a little better. The kids have almost stopped snarling at one another, and I'm learning to live with a noise level I never thought I could stand. I am going to try to have some sort of a research project. I've identified six students, three in each block, and I'm going to collect their work and focus on them in my journal writing.

**November 9:** Six students — what a joke! Looking back from the midnight privacy of my workroom, I squirm with embarrassment. My best laid plans have been altered dramatically by the facts of middle grade life: Of the six, Paul and Jose have refused to turn in any work. Cesar has been identified as being a special education student who has too many influences on his learning other than my classroom. Cynthia has moved away, and Albert's many wild transgressions of our discipline policy will, I'm afraid, bring his collection of referrals to the magic number necessary for transfer to an alternative program. So I'm left with Matthew and happy to have him.

Although things have calmed somewhat since our bewildering days of September, the calm has brought

an even deeper realization of the disparity between the reading and writing I envision for my seventh graders and what most of this year's students can actually achieve. So, I have no thought of studying revision, as such. For now, I'm just saving Matthew's work, hoping to see how he changes and grows as a writer. What if he regresses? Guess I'll cross that bridge when I come to it.

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***Anyway, the decision about which student to study has got to be made early, and lived with; you can't go back a few weeks or months and pick up the pieces.***

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I am already learning about the perils of teacher research. If you study one student, there's no way of knowing, right at the beginning of the year when you want to save some early work, which student should be "the one." As with my other five, students disappear from the classroom, physically or figuratively; or their strengths or weaknesses, which made their work seem interesting to study, may prove to be illusory. Anyway, the decision about which student to study has got to be made early, and lived with; you can't go back a few weeks or months and pick up the pieces. It's hard enough to get work saved, in all its drafts, with prewriting, assignment descriptions, responses and other bits and pieces, while juggling all the other parts of the job.

**November 26:** Okay, this is it. Time to get serious. I've got copies of Matthew's work so far neatly arranged in a binder, beginning with the first piece he wrote.

On September 8, we did "The Perfect Gift." Matthew's prewriting: *The best gift for my mom would be a car. it meses up alot I am tiar of the way it looks am tar of it insid*

His rough draft: *the best gift for my mother is a car because it mese up alot. I am tierd of the color and the way it runs and look out side. and the way it look inside.*

Final draft: *The best gift for my mom is a car because it mest up alot I am tierd of the color and the way it runs and look on the out side and the way it look inside*

Matthew's comparison of rough and final: *The chane I Made was I pit rans and I made some spelling correctin*

Well. If I'd wanted a piece of writing to remind me of my despair at the beginning of the year, of my dismay at the lack of preparation and experience exemplified by Matthew's paper, this is it. Matthew's work represents that of many students, and I remember what I was looking at the first few hot September evenings.

Let's see if I can make any sense of this. Matthew knows about prewriting: His original cluster has boxes, circles, and arrows (not shown here). He's done this before. It's interesting that his prewriting and rough draft are almost identical in words and length. When he wrote his rough draft, he added *because* which indicates some instinct for syntax; he is relating one idea to another. This wouldn't be worth commenting on except I'm discovering that each year more and more students do less and less of this connection, and I'm increasingly confronted with primer prose composed of sentences eight to ten words long. In his rough draft he's elaborated (if that isn't stretching the meaning of that word) on *meses up alot* by adding *the way it runs*. Several things concern me. One is a lack of awareness of audience, in that he seems to have no interest in convincing anyone that a new car is the best gift for his mother. He simply expresses his own feelings about her present car. The piece has almost no specifics, relying instead on general words and expressions: *the color, the way it runs, the way it look inside*. Most worrisome is Matthew's reluctance to write anything at all. Matthew does have a clear idea of the physical appearance of an essay: On his final draft there's a title and the indentation of a paragraph, and some periods were placed correctly. His idea of revision is consistent with that of most of my students: Correct the spelling. Except for helpfully inserting *on the* between *look* and *outside*, there were no other changes — no other words chosen, no elaboration, and no reordering of ideas.

**November 29:** Still trying to catch up on scrutinizing some of Matthew's work. On October 12, we edited childhood memory poems. Matthew's edited version reads:

***My Childhood Memory***

*I could be any age I would be  
four having a stuffed dog  
five sitting in a chair watch t.v.  
six being scared of the dark at night  
seven getting a bike for my birthday  
eight falling off my bike*

*nine being afraid of the dentist  
ten afraid to look under my bed  
eleven afraid of school  
twelve afraid of starting in Lincoln school.*

As I look at Matthew's poem this evening, I notice that many lines deal with being afraid of something. This is consistent with my biggest concern about Matthew: He's afraid to write, afraid of the mistakes he knows will characterize his work. My intuition tells me that the only thing to do is to keep him writing — constantly — and to only hold him accountable for correctness when I can provide direct instruction or pair him up with a competent peer editor.

**December 11:** It's Sunday night and usually my low point of the week as I realize what I haven't gotten done over the weekend and that somehow my life has taken a wrong turn. As the rest of the civilized world is relaxing with a good book, I'm faced with lesson plans and paper grading. But this Sunday night is different. I have looked at Matthew's "My Favorite Toy" essay, and I'm happy. Something's happening in Matthew's work.

Matthew's clustering: *stuffed dog* in a circle in the middle; evenly arranged around this, all in circles and connected to the middle circles by lines, are the following: *what color, what it did, what it lok lik, where is it now and how it is, How old was I when I got it, what I called it, what kind of dog was it, How I play with it, How big was it, Who gave it to me.* Each item is checked off.

Matthew's rough (and I mean rough) draft:

*My favorite toy was a stuffed dog. It was brown with big ears and it was small. It was about a foot tall. I was about 4 or 5 when I got it. I got it from my mom and dad for my burthday. and I called it dan. I do not know what kind of dog it is but it has big ear, and like a it is small eye and it small. I played with it game and other stuff that I make up game that I do not know wat they are like I would throw him in the air so he can fly and I would catch and now I have it in a bag with outhur stuff anamals ands it look bran now but it is a little faded ane the ear are the way the where when I got the dog, and the with nead to be wash a little and ther is nothing rong with it is still soned to gether no hols, or teare in it, and his eye are ok the only thing rong with him is he is a fade that all rone for him and I still have it rigt now*

Okay. So this is a mess. But two full pages! He's named a color and a size (I'm thinking about that first "Perfect Gift" essay when I didn't even know the color of car that Matthew was tired of), and he's mentioned, although in a general way, size of ears and eyes. He's doggedly (no pun intended) worked his way though every point in his prewriting in an organized manner, losing focus only when he mentioned twice that the only thing wrong with the toy is that it is faded. He's used a few somewhat specific words: *faded, sewed, and tears*, and mentioned a specific activity that he remembered: throwing Dan in the air so he could fly.

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***As I look at Matthew's poem this evening, I notice that many lines deal with being afraid of something. This is consistent with my biggest concern about Matthew: He's afraid to write, afraid of the mistakes he knows will characterize his work.***

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Through the first three fourths of a page, there are few errors, though the sentences are very short. As Matthew seemed to become more interested in his topic, he became less able to control syntax, punctuation, and spelling. The more involved he became, the less he attended to correctness. I can't help but feel this is a strange sort of progress. In this piece, Matthew was willing to immerse himself in his topic at the expense of mechanics. He seems ready to take some risks — a requisite attitude for good writers.

I'm looking at the responses Matthew got from his partners. They're awful. If I didn't know students could do better than this, I'd give up on response groups:

*Dear Matthew I liked the part where you made up games and when you threw it up in the air so it could fly. I would ask you if it had legs or arms and if you took it places like to fresno. your friend Jesse*

*Mathue your story was about a stuffed dog you should writ your name end of the story ... (indcipherable) ... why did you get a stuffed dog why did you have numbers in the side (a reference to the word count Matthew wrote on his paper) by Sal*



*Dear Matthew, I really liked your story. so how has dan been doing well so I see you had a lot of fun with dan! What was the game you played with him. Sincerely, Jaime*

*Dear Matthew My favert part of you story is when you played with and when you got him for you brthday and that you still have it with you. what hapend to you dog? How long is it sincerely Matthew (This is the response Matthew wrote to himself.)*

As the best response he received, Matthew chose Jaime's: *because he ask good question.*

Matthew's group is struggling with writing as much as he is. Response groups need to be heterogeneous, but they also need to be self-selected. While inexperienced writers don't need to hear from other inexperienced writers, the most accomplished writers definitely need to hear from other accomplished writers. Now there's a research question: "What's the best way to set up response groups?" or, "What kinds of responses are students capable of writing to one another?" Guess I'll leave those to another teacher researcher. But I doubt that Matthew's revision efforts were guided by these responses. Another thought: I know Matthew's teammates are very poor readers — they probably don't read each other's papers any more perceptively than they read a printed text — so how can I possibly expect them to respond helpfully? Maybe oral reading is the answer for these groups. Certainly more careful monitoring on my part seems called for.

Looking at Matthew's marked up rough draft, I see that his opening, *My favorite toy was a stuffed dog* became *I remeber when I was a, small kid and I had a stuff dog*. I'm willing to see that as an effort to orient and engage a reader. He's also added a sentence that makes his paper seem more finished: To his previous last sentence, *... and I still have it right now*, he's now added *That is why he was my favorite to me*. He's made some changes in pronoun use: *It to he and them to him*. Some bits that just stopped me cold because they were almost incoherent have been changed: *and like a it is small eye and it small ...* became *... and he has small eye*, while *... and the with need to be wash* is now *...and it needs to be wash*. I'm willing to see this effort to smooth the bumpiest parts of the piece as reader awareness, the absolutely crucial element to growth in writing achievement. Too many students painstakingly

copy over these garbled passages without ever realizing how unintelligible they are; Matthew's ability to re-see his piece, at least bits of it, is a little spring in the desert for me.

Looking at his final draft, I also see that he's spelled many more words correctly, though there are still many errors:

#### ***My favorite toy when I was small***

*I remeber when I was a small kid and I had a stuff dog it was brown with big ears and it was small. It was about a foot tall. I was about 4 or 5 when I got him. I got him from my Mom and Dad for my birthday. And I called him dan. I did not know what kind of a dog he is but he has big ears, and he has small eye. I played with it game and other stuff that I would make up game that I did not know what they were like I would throw him up in the air so he can fly. And Now I still have him in a bag with outhter stuff animal and it look brand now but it is faded a little. And the ear are the way they were when I got dan. And it needs to be wash a little. An there is nothing wrong with him. He still has no hols, tears in him. And his eye are ok. The only thing wrong with him is he is faded. And I still have him right now. That is why he was my favorite to me.*

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***Too many students painstakingly copy over these garbled passages, without ever realizing how unintelligible they are; Matthew's ability to re-see his piece, at least bits of it, is a little spring in the desert for me.***

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As I look at the comments Matthew made on the differences between his rough and final versions, I see he's noted every single change he made and added *I do not know how to do R in handwritten*. For some reason that touches me; Matthew is owning up to every shortcoming he has.

**December 15:** Seeing Matthew's progress has reinforced my determination to do some sort of research project this year, even if it's only looking closely at



Matthew's work. But don't I have to have some sort of hypothesis as to why Matthew's making some progress? If there's one thing we've done a lot of so far, it's Rebekah Caplan's "showing writing." The way I use these short pieces (per Caplan) is simply to give credit for them and then choose one or two to read aloud. Maybe, just by accident, I provided what Matthew needed: acceptance of his efforts to write.

**January 9:** Each team worked to make a "poster" of the main ideas and details of the Aztec lesson from the social studies text. Matthew was completely involved, leaning over his teammate who was recording the group's ideas. At the end of the session, I asked his team what each had done. Matthew said he had read the textbook and found details (other team tasks were to identify main idea, check spelling, and actually do the writing). Earlier in the year Matthew hardly participated. He'd often sit in the classroom rather than go out for a break.

**January 10:** I decided to sit in on the discussion in Matthew's novel group. Big mistake! Me: "What's happened so far [in *Old Yeller*]?" Lupe recounted the story, in interminable detail. As he talked, Jose looked up names in the novel and supplied them to him and referred to the novel to confirm the setting. Matthew sat, saying nothing. When I asked him what he could add, the others talked before he could answer. I reminded them that they all needed to talk. Then I asked Matthew in what ways *Old Yeller* was like *Where the Red Fern Grows*. Matthew could not or would not say anything about the book, not even that both books were about boys, despite much prompting from me along those lines.

**January 20:** I asked the novel groups to discuss one character in their novel. Never one to give up when something isn't working, I joined Matthew's group, even though my presence last week was obviously inhibiting. As I pulled my little stool up to their table, silence fell. I asked them what character they were discussing, and then reminded them that I shouldn't be asking this. They very politely refrained from agreeing with me. Lupe repeated the question, and Jose said, "The dog" — not even "Old Yeller." Lupe, the summarizer, resumed that role, turning toward me. I made him turn toward the rest of the group, asking myself why I'm butting in but continuing to do so. In my best I'm-in-control-here manner, I said that they must talk about a person. They decided on

Travis and proceeded to hold a very halting discussion. Matthew's only contribution to the entire discussion, when I asked how Billy from *Red Fern* and Travis are alike, was to state that they both don't go to school.

As I look back on this entry and the one from last week, I'm comparing Matthew's active participation, as I watched him from a distance, with his reticence when I tried to interact with his team. The progress I see Matthew making might be partly due to a group structure that allows him to try out ideas, make mistakes, and get some non-threatening guidance from his peers. I usually leave the groups pretty much alone as they work on a task or hold a discussion, waiting until the time when each group shares with the rest of the class to learn what they accomplished. However, lately I've been thinking that a "real" teacher researcher would be more actively involved with Matthew. I think I'll go back to my more passive role and quit bugging him.

**March 19:** We're gearing up for the writing proficiency exam. This year it's to be a report of information essay. I thought the kids would groan about my assigning topics instead of the writers' workshop, but they seem to like the idea that we're all moving together toward this huge challenge. Maybe they're just tired of trying to think up their own writing ideas.

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*I can see myself studying one student a year until I am so old and eccentric that the district makes me a roving sub to get me to resign.*

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**March 30:** Every once in a while I do get a good idea. The kids and I were both running out of steam preparing for the proficiency exam, so I decided to fall back on the workshop approach and told the kids to simply write about something they are good at. Everybody got real busy. Matthew was writing about lowrider bikes.

**April 3:** I looked through the stack of final drafts from the morning block and found Matthew's.

*Dear Anthony,*

*Do you know anything about lowrider bicycles? If*

*you dont let me tell you about them. The are a lot of part. The part are a gooseneck. (Matthew lists many parts to a bike.)*

*The second thing that I would like to tell you is that this hobby cost a lot of money. hear are some prises... (There's a long list of items with prices.)*

*The third thing I would like to tell you is that I put one of these bicycles to gether for the fun of it. Some people do it for the fun of it. Some people put the bicycle to gether just to keep out of truble. Some people just experament and see what they can do whit it and turn it into something nice.*

*I got the price from the lowerider bicycle magazin. Hear are some of bicycles that are in the magazin. (Matthew names bicycles like Heaven on Earth, Touch of Gold, and Joker and describes each one.) Ther are a lot of more bicycles in the magazing.*

*This is the only thing that I would like to tell you about these kind of bike. This is a good hobby and fun and you may want to try it to.*

I could not have asked that Matthew make any more progress so far this year than he has shown me with this paper. If I were a more experienced teacher researcher, I might have devised a way to tell whether it was the workshop approach, the process approach, or Matthew's own inner literacy clock that suddenly ticked over to a new day. I do know a few things. As I look back at all the work I collected for Matthew, I see that the "perfect gift" paper is representative of what Matthew wrote for the first few weeks and that "favorite toy" represents his work from the second quarter. Now I have this paper, several hundred words long and full of concrete language and words like *experament* that he's not afraid to misspell. And he consistently focuses on his topic and his audience, beginning with, *Do you know anything about lowerider bicycles? If you dont let me tell you about them*, and ending with, *This is a good hobby and fun and you may want to try it to*. Even his use of clumsy transitions, *the first thing ... the second thing*, heartens me because of the awareness of the need of a reader to be led through the piece.

**April 5:** Now that my initial jubilation over Matthew's paper has worn off, I'm left with some questions. I didn't observe Matthew carefully as he worked on

this paper; in looking back at his rough draft, I find that it's almost indecipherable because of all the editing and revision marks. He crossed out an incoherent section at the bottom of the first page and added several phrases on Post-It notes. His beginning is the same on both rough and final versions, but he added the last sentence when he revised. His editing partner was Rudy, one of the best spellers in the class. But the length of the paper seems to have overwhelmed both Matthew and Rudy, since many spelling errors remain in the final. So again, I've got more questions than answers: How, exactly, does a student revise? What made Matthew want to change his paper? How did he decide what to take out, and what to leave in? Did Rudy give him the idea for the conclusion? (Everything on Matthew's paper is in his own handwriting.) A good researcher would supplement looking at papers with close classroom observation and conversation with the student. That's what I can't seem to manage — yet.

In fact, during the 1994-95 school year, as in many previous years, I did keep a classroom journal in a sporadic but strangely satisfying way. It just didn't have many entries about Matthew. Although it didn't focus on either my original research plan or, very often, on Matthew, keeping a classroom journal made me think of myself as a writer again. But it also brought the tension and guilt of not writing. If only each day I could write down one incident, impression, observation — something concrete, stated in the most precise words I can summon — what a picture I'd have of my students. I couldn't help but become a better writer — not good, but better. Also, when I do a study of an individual student, I want to record the entire classroom context in order to see that student's work in perspective. I write every day for a few weeks, and I find myself calmer in the face of classroom disappointment and confusion and happier in the midst of success as I think of sorting it all out that evening at my computer. Then more days, stretching into weeks, will fly by when I don't write a word about my classroom.

This year I didn't even consider any research project other than trying to tell the story of one student or, rather, the little part of that story that I've been able to piece together. I chose a second language learner. The plan was simply to write about what happened in

class to provide a context for the student's work as I collected it, then to revisit that work, look at it whole and in pieces, and write about it. I fall far short of my goal of writing daily, but I am consistent about collecting my student's work. And when I do immerse myself in a student's work, write about it, and learn, the rewards are always there.

What's the future for me as a teacher researcher? I can see myself studying one student a year until I am so old and eccentric that the district makes me a roving sub to get me to resign. I've learned organizational tricks that make saving, copying, storing, and studying a student's writing one more thing that I can fit into my day, one more plate that I can keep in the air. I don't feel I'll ever get tired of doing this or cease to learn from it. It's something that can't be false; basing everything on a student's actual work keeps me grounded in reality. Moving from the particular to the general, taking what I learn about one student's work and using that to

improve my teaching of all my students seems sensible. My life as a teacher can never have enough moments when I know, really know, that a student is learning. If I hadn't sat in despair on a fall evening and transcribed Matthew's 37-word "perfect gift" piece, in which he doesn't even care to tell me what color something is, I'd never have known what he'd accomplished with his several pages about lowrider bikes and his questions and invitations to a reader. How can I not do classroom research?

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*Martha Dudley, a teacher consultant with the San Joaquin Valley Writing Project, teaches at Abraham Lincoln Middle School in Selma, CA.*

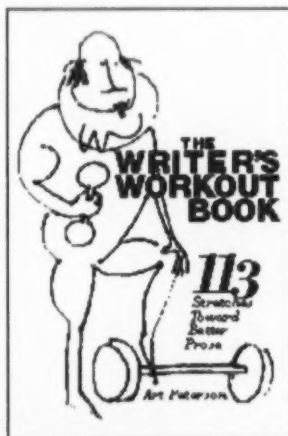
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### **CSW Announces Fred Hechinger Award**

Sarah Freedman, director of the Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy, has announced the establishment of the Fred Hechinger Award in honor of the late *New York Times* correspondent and co-chair of the CSW National Advisory Board.

The award will be presented annually to a Writing Project teacher consultant who, through classroom practice, workshop presentations, and professional writing, makes significant connections between research and practice.

Freedman said, "By co-chairing our board, Fred Hechinger showed his abiding concern for improving the dialogue between schools and universities. This award reflects what we are all about."

This fall, site directors will receive further information about the award. Each site will be encouraged to nominate one teacher consultant.

A committee consisting of CSW researchers, NWP site directors and teacher consultants will review the applications and select the first recipient.

The CSW and NWP thank Sybil Jacobson, executive director of the Metropolitan Life Foundation and a member of the Center's advisory board, for her generous contribution in Hechinger's memory, making this award possible.

### **NWP Launches *The Voice***

The NWP is pleased to announce the premier issue of its newest publication, *The Voice*. Targeted for teacher consultants, site directors and others with a special interest in the workings of the NWP, this exciting ten-page newspaper will be published three times a year and will include everything NWP mavens want to know. For more information, call (510) 642-0963.

### **Directors Brave Rapids**

During the first week in June, Writing Project directors from several sites around the country gathered in Northern Arizona for a retreat which combined sharing, reflection and adventure.

The event, organized by Greg Larkin, director of the Northern Arizona Writing Project, and Sherry Swain, director of the Mississippi State Writing/Thinking Project, began with a rafting trip down the Colorado River. By all reports, this river trip was an exhilarating experience only slightly marred by an ambush, launched against the peace loving site directors by a group that Project Outreach Director Elyse Eidman-Aadahl characterized as "dirty dealing sidewinders armed with super-soakers" (as opposed to just your regular old generic soaker).

After the group dried off, they returned to Flagstaff where they shared ideas about conducting Summer Institutes. The directors then traveled to the Native American reservation in Ganado where they modeled a basic Summer Institute, reading and discussing Native American literature and persuasive writing.

The event concluded with a trip to the beautiful desert area around Canyon de Chelly. In addition to Larkin, Swain and Eidman-Aadahl, directors who attended the retreat included Michael Angelotti, Nick Coles, Bettye Farmer, Pat Fox, Dan McQuagge, Richard Sterling, Marcia Venegas-Garcia, Denise Van Briggie, B. J. Wagner, and Mark Wekander.

Almost all of the participants expressed an interest in pursuing more of the same next year — although, of course, with some minor variations.

"Next year," said Eidman-Aadahl, still seething over the sneak attack perpetrated against NWP innocents by super-soaker low-lives, "we will go armed to the teeth."



## *Call for Manuscripts*

*We welcome lively, well-written articles on the writing process and on teaching writing, as well as articles on research in the teaching of it. The articles can take the form of personal experience or opinion, or can explore the work of others who have contributed to the field.*

*We are especially interested in articles by classroom teachers. If you have an idea you would like to develop, send a query letter or give us a call at 510-642-0976. Send ideas, drafts, and completed manuscripts (if possible include a disk) to: The NWP/CSW Quarterly, Graduate School of Education, 5627 Tolman Hall, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720.*

— The Editors

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*The Quarterly*, a joint publication of the National Writing Project and the National Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy, is devoted to concerns surrounding the teaching and learning of Writing. Each issue of *The Quarterly* offers a wealth of resources and ideas for professionals, including articles, interviews with prominent members of the field, book reviews, and brief updates on Center research and Writing Project activities. Recent issues have focused on themes such as using portfolios to assess writing, teachers as researchers, writing in the community, writing in the multicultural classroom, and writing across the curriculum. *The Quarterly* is published four times per year (Winter, Spring, Summer, Fall). A subscription is \$15.00 per year (\$21.00 outside the U.S.A. and Canada). Order your subscription through the sponsoring organization of your choice:

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# *The Quarterly*

OF THE NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT & THE CENTER FOR THE STUDY  
OF WRITING AND LITERACY

Fall 1996

Volume 18, Number 4



Why Do We Have  
to Read This?

(One Teacher's Answer on Page 10)

# CONTENTS

## *GIVING THE EYES A VOICE*

- Location, Location, Location:  
A Way into Descriptive Writing 1  
RAY SKJELBRED

- Picture This! 6  
STEPHEN MARCUS

## *CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS*

- Literature in the Classroom or  
"Say Not the Struggle Not Availeth" 10  
JANE JUSKA

- How Enzymes Act: Skit Writing in Science Class 13  
JOHN DORROH

## *VIEWPOINT*

- Franklin and Whitman: Teaching for the Head and Heart 18  
HOLLY STEIN

## *A WRITING TEACHER REMINISCES*

- Logorrhea or the Dangers of Unprotected Lex: 21  
Confessions of a Word Junkie  
CHARLES WATERWORTH

## *INDIVIDUALIZING*

- Muscle Car English 25  
JOANNE DOWD

- Creating a Work of their Own: 30  
Skills and Voice in an Eighth Grade Research Project  
ROBERT ROTH

# Location, Location, Location: A Way into Descriptive Writing

by

RAY SKJELBRED



It's a fall day and dark storm clouds are blowing over our school. The wind picks up dramatically and student eyes (reading up until this time) drift toward the windows. "Let's go to locations," I say. Students jump up, grab their writing notebooks, and run out the door, scattering in all directions. I had hoped we could find five minutes to write before the storm actually hit, some quiet time for new understanding: something about motion or light or shading or sound, maybe a memory recalled or perhaps an observation of how our earthly places respond to the mystery of wind. Or most importantly, how a particular part of the world had become a different place from the last time students had written about it, either because they had changed or because the place had changed. But the storm hits earlier than expected, and very quickly a group of wet, laughing eighth-graders run back into

the classroom — all except Simon, who had calmly taken a folding chair to his location and now doesn't want to budge. When I call to him and tell him to come in, he does, slowly wiping steam from his glasses. He is smiling, happy that he has extended himself, but a little worried that his writing has been washed away. And then almost every hand shoots up. They all want to read aloud even though most of their writing had ended abruptly.

What were we doing? This was one scene from a yearlong writing experiment in what I call "location writing." The goal of "location writing" is to sharpen observation skills: to help students learn that what is "out there" is partly "us" and partly "it," and we must be careful to look closely if we are going to "see" it; to know the importance of the small detail; to choose

verbs and adjectives for their accuracy and their sensory impact; to move slowly, avoiding quick, subjective judgments about what we see or think.

I have always used paintings, photographs, films and nature to sharpen student thinking, seeing and writing, but last year I tried this new idea. I presented each student with a "location" that would be used for various observing and writing activities throughout the year.

To prepare students for this experience, I needed to push them to believe that they always have more to say than they think they do. I prodded them in this direction, introducing them to the concept of "form" and its subcategories — depth, size, shading, light, color, lines and motion — as these apply to visual arts. These ways of seeing help students come at an observation from many different directions. I contrasted these surface features with "content," that is, such concepts as ideas, morality, intellect and memory, approaches to observation that get under the surface. We observed and wrote about paintings and photographs with these concepts in mind. I chose to use many visual examples that revealed intricate or unusually small detail. I looked for works which left a mysterious or possibly unexplainable impact. Brueghel and Magritte worked especially well. I used William Carlos Williams' "Pictures From Brueghel" and other poems as illustrations of a kind of location writing (a poet looking at a painting). I gave a variety of directions to help them shift the focus of their observations: find an important detail that someone else might not see; or establish an emotion for someone in the painting or photograph and then conjecture about how this feeling would affect that person's perception of other things in the work; or focus on a particular sense, deciding what sounds or smells, for instance, might emanate from this scene.

I was now ready to assign the fifteen sites. Now I admit that when it comes to writing locations, my school is not typical. This K-8 private school enjoys a semi-rural setting. An urban teacher adapting these ideas would need to choose among less bucolic, if no less interesting locations. Further, fifteen locations were possible because I meet an average of fifteen students per section. So readers will need to consider what I describe here not as a blueprint but as a template in need of some creative variations.

I planned that one student in each of my four sections would have one location; thus four students who were not working together could ostensibly be doing the "same" work and — at intervals — we could compare how they had "seen" the same thing. As it turned out, some classes had more or fewer than fifteen, so I sometimes needed to omit a location or double up the participants.

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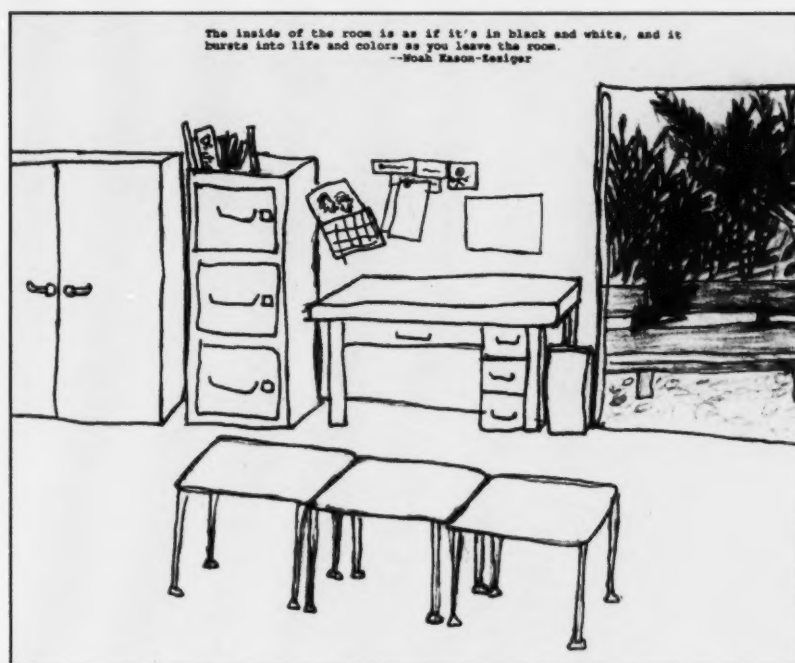
***What can students learn from this activity? It's not just that we all see things in different ways; it's really that we all choose a moment of time or an angle of perception that influences everything that follows. That's the force that allows infinite possibilities in writing.***

---

Here are the locations as I defined them: the lock on the lower field; lower school, grassy area; red barn; picnic bench by middle school sandbox; bench behind the library; art shrine; bench around the tree in the art quad; step up area; downhill slope below room 22; between creek and room 28; doorway of room 33; new building; sandbox behind Mr. Densmore's room; rocks in front of the shed; the creek, halfway to the dam. I put these titles on strips of paper and placed them in a hat. Every member of each class drew randomly, and then I had them record their locations on the inside covers of their writing notebooks.

When I first assigned location writing, some students felt uneasy about it. Of course, they enjoyed the idea of leaving class and sitting outside. But, while students were intrigued by the novelty of this plan, they had to adjust to the responsibility of working as "real" writers, making choices without my constant direction. They asked the same question that might occur to any reasonable person: "Won't observing and writing about the same location every couple of weeks get boring?" To convince them that this need not be the case, I regularly tried to give them a starting place for their observations: a small detail at their location or a change in the season or weather or physical environment. Sometimes I asked them to





The Doorway of Room 33: Noah's View

look for changes in their own way of seeing the same thing or changes in their ability to write about what they saw.

At first some students gave me the classic line, "I'm done, what do I do now?" I would always reply, "You can't be done. There is more to see." Or, "Just start over. Try it another way. You're just going to write for the next 30 minutes. If you get stuck, that's O.K. But you're always trying out new ways. Move around. I mean physically. Actually move away from your location. Or turn 180 degrees. Or do the same things you did when you wrote about paintings. Just start with one detail and see where it goes."

As the year went on, they adjusted to the idea, and I began to suggest ways of writing that paralleled work we were doing in class. I suggested they concentrate on active verbs, or begin with a subordinating conjunction and see where it leads, or write about the sounds, or look at an old writing and compare it to the present scene.

As we wrote my sense of what the activity should be became clearer. I realized students should read aloud as much as possible so that they could learn from each other and gain confidence in their work. On a few

occasions when I planned to have students write and not read aloud, their vocal protests convinced me to always leave time for reading. I found that I should visit with each student during the process, maybe to keep them on task, but mostly to suggest, advise, encourage and keep them aware of time. I walked constantly during these sessions. I always saw everyone once, and generally saw most people twice during a class period. I made some lucky guesses about what might be some good spots and we had delightful surprises in almost every location. "The lock on the lower field," a huge sculpture of a typical pad-lock with a keyhole facing San Quentin, suddenly disappeared during the last month of school. The "new building" was being finished as we began our writing

and the spirit of its place developed as the year went on. Students with creek locations could actually sit in the creek in September, October, May and June, but observed raging water much of the rest of the year during California's fall and winter months.

Students really did learn to slow down. They began to appreciate the varied ways of seeing the uneventful and commonplace. As early as September, and before they had the skill with sentences they would develop later on, students were making careful and fresh observations. Of the "art shrine" (a fancifully-designed kiosk near the art buildings), Justine wrote:

*The Art shrine is very bright and all the colors go together. Shapes are cut out of the sides. There is room inside for three or four people. On the front are two French doors. The top is pointed and has two wide shingles on it. Red slabs of wood extend from the roof. The shapes cut out of the side, are abstract. Blue fringe surrounds them.*

In another class on the same day, Lorna saw a rather different art shrine:

*On the back there is a long smear of yellow, green and blue paint. In the top left hand corner there's a cut out*

circle. The colors make it look like an eclipse of the sun. The trees and bushes blow in the wind. Blossoms are falling around to the ground from the tree above, over the shingled roof of the Art shrine.

*I see a thin layer of dust all over the windows on the door of the shrine. It's smeared by the fingerprints of kids.*

I made sure that all the "art shrine" writers read each other's sharp and complementary work on that day.



The Doorway of Room 33: Liz's View

"The doorway of room 33" was my own classroom, and even though some students felt a bit cheated that they didn't get to go away somewhere, they did, after all, have the room to themselves and they could look out or in and use the door frame as a focusing lens. Noah noticed the mood change:

*If I look from the outside, I see a small warm empty room. All the rooms around it are filled with noisy talkative kids and teachers. Even the colorful pictures are frozen, waiting until people are back to burst into life. Everything in the room is stopped in mid-motion.*

Liz wrote:

*This room looks big from the back of the classroom and the doorway shows very little of the outside*

world. From the outside, the room looks and feels small to me when I race through the door. ... When I stood in front of the blackboard and looked around in curiosity, I felt compacted and it looked like it too.

Lauren wrote:

*I can hear James Nagle's voice talking about the number 122. I can hear the people on the upper field playing soccer. It is dirty and dusty around here. I am sitting at the beginning of the concrete part of the creek. I don't like my spot much. I am sitting under a tree in the line of room 33. The creek is dry right now. ... Many people walk past me and can't see me. I am behind a fence sort of hidden. On top of Mr. Densmore's room there is a gadget with 3 sticks and at the end of 3 sticks are three balls. I think this is very odd. I just moved inside. I am looking at the pictures. I like the one with the three old ladies by the flowers and the one of the lady floating.*

What can students learn from this activity? It's not just that we all see things in different ways; it's really that we all choose a moment of time or an angle of perception that influences everything that follows. That's the force that allows infinite possibilities in writing. On a particular day, "The creek, halfway to the dam" was one experience to Danielle:

*I'm sitting on a tree branch that crosses over the water. Right now the creek is dry.*

Another to Andrew:

*It is a dismal Thursday morning with fog covering the sky.*

and yet another to Rory:

*There is a big leafy tree with lots of ants on it.*

As the year went on, students learned to "use" their locations. At "lower school, grassy area," Talia concentrated on a single tree. At "between creek and room 28," Simon kept moving up a hill to get different angles on the same scene. He saw connections. He began to reflect on the sometimes uneasy relationship between humanity and nature:

148

*Here two worlds meet: the world of cement and noise with the world of grass and tranquillity. A bird calls, then stops, harshly interrupted by the laughter of students. An ant crawls across my page searching, probing, judging. A dry cement creek bed is silently defied by sticks, rocks, dry grass and the occasional green plant sprouting out of the cracks. ... Some of the other effects of humanity can be seen, a piece of cardboard, a plastic wrapper. Even my sitting here will someday have an effect on the erosion and life on the hill.*

In May, as part of a concluding response, I asked for a detailed color drawing. The assignment would also include a written observation, one that could be selected from earlier work. Like the writing the visual work could be close and detailed, focused on specifics, distant, abstract or fanciful.

Rebecca looked through "the lock on the lower field" and drew San Quentin in the distance. Ryan sat with his back to the lock, blurred the image of San Francisco Bay and drew small details of the field in the opposite direction. He never drew the lock. Evan sort of suspended himself in the air over the right shoulder of the lock, so close that the image almost escaped me when I first looked at it. I saw the surprise, the thinking angle of his image, and sensed that this is the scene he would like to have written, even though at this point his writing couldn't match his seeing. Reflecting on Evan's work I reminded myself once more about the necessity of honoring differences. Evan is a smart and observant young man who did not yet have the words and sentence structures to say what he was seeing. But he did see it.

Other student art revealed unique perceptions. Jarreau's "red barn" was much different than the one portrayed by others who took in the same scene. His was an absolutely realistic portrayal of the barn, with careful attention to detail, but above the barn he has rendered a fantastic image with tree branches going through it. The effect was to juxtapose the ordinary and the surreal, much like Margritte.

At "the rocks in front of the shed," Andrew P. looked across the field and accurately drew a detailed sculpture, an abstract obelisk placed flatly against a gener-

alized blue sky, brown hills and green grass. Alison viewed an entire playing field with soccer goals, school buildings, weeds, rocks and staircases. She left out the sculpture entirely. Kristen looked straight down and drew a large, inspired thistle.

Some time after the last location writing, I asked students what they had gained from the experience. They said that being alone on location helped them think of themselves as writers, finding ways to get started, learning from the silences. There was no more "writer's block." They had learned to follow small threads of thought.



The Doorway of Room 33: Lauren's View

There were some complaints. Some believed we should have changed locations halfway through the year. Others thought some locations were too close together and that sometimes distracted. They didn't want two people in the same place at the same time. Next year, I will make changes to remedy these problems.

In retrospect I find that perhaps the most memorable aspect of location writing was the informal mood that is normally not part of school. There was an easiness, a comfortable pattern that we all seemed to enjoy. I loved chatting with my students. I loved walking the campus and giving a verbal nudge one way or another, or helping someone see some "hidden" details.

*continued on page 9*

# Picture This!

by

STEPHEN MARCUS



*Editors' note: This is the first of two articles by Stephen Marcus describing his work with the National Writing Project/Polaroid Education Program Alliance. In this first article, he presents some teaching ideas that readers may adapt for their classrooms.*

*In the next issue of The Quarterly, Marcus will discuss how the Alliance's marriage of words and pictures has helped teacher researchers document and understand their work.*

*Stephen Marcus is co-director of the South Coast Writing Project at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He coordinates the National Writing Project Technology Network as well as the California Writing Project/California Technology Project Alliance.*

If we accept the concept of multiple intelligences, students and teachers will need strategies for developing a wider range of aptitudes and abilities. New technologies are available that will help people with a variety of talents show the world what's on their minds. However, as the following discussion makes clear, even an "old" and relatively simple technology can increase one of these abilities, visual intelligence, and writing about photography can give the eyes a voice.

### Overview

By the end of the current academic year, 46 National Writing Project affiliates in alliance with the Polaroid Education Program will have provided one or more workshops for some 6000 teachers. Over a period of four years, the sessions have focused on incorporating visual literacy with the teaching and learning of writing — all the while enhancing students' motivation, creativity, and self-image.

Participants in workshops currently receive approximately \$75.00 worth of free materials, including cameras, camera bags, film, and curriculum materials along with a three-hour inservice that prepares them to help their students to make rather than just take pictures. "Making" pictures implies a constructivist approach in which the photographer is using conscious, informed choices to construct an image, not just passively recording whatever fits into the viewfinder. Participants learn how to create and read pictures with increased sophistication and to understand how photography can serve as a prompt for and a supplement to writing.

The NWP/PEP Alliance illustrates the value of a "low tech" tool in the hands of talented educators. What follows is a collection of events and applications that evolved out of the NWP/PEP Alliance.

The South Coast Writing Project's first PEP workshop was led by Peggy Hooberman, a former director of a nonprofit multicultural arts organization who also had 18 years of classroom teaching experience. She was a terrific presenter with loads of amusing and instructive anecdotes. She had experienced every sort of problem that was likely to come up when using cameras in the classroom, from overeager shutter-bugs ("give the camera to someone else while you watch your picture develop") to unfocused images ("tie a no-closer-than-this string to the front of the camera as a tape measure"). She showed us how to recycle almost every part of an empty film packet, using the batteries for science projects and parts of the film container for picture frames. She told us how to get free and reduced-cost film through local business sponsorships and deals with retailers on film approaching the end of its shelf-life. She shared the advantages and disadvantages of having various quantities of cameras in the classroom — e.g., collaborative groups using a single camera can use and develop some of the same skills and roles as other kinds of production groups, including producer, director, props, and camera operator.



Toward the end of the workshop, I asked the teachers to take just a few minutes to jot down a classroom activity that combined writing with the use of instant photography, assuming that they had a reasonable number of cameras, film, and other materials. I collected these "bright ideas" in an anthology. They ranged from an activity for student teachers: "photograph scenes from around the school and write about them from a student's point of view"; to ideas for kindergartners: "make a 'floor quilt' of pictures of small things on the floor — like staples, bits of confetti, a paper clip — and write down what children think the objects are." While this collection of ideas was necessarily sketchy, it was in the spirit of the Writing Project that teachers became involved in the substance of the workshop, creating their own materials and sharing their expertise.

### Photography as a Prompt for Writing

I depend on the kindness of happenstance. In one case, I took a camera to a potluck picnic at the end of the first week of one of our Writing Project's summer institutes. I figured I'd take some snapshots of people to put on the bulletin board (another small way to help establish a sense of community). As it happened, I took a picture of the food table, groaning under the weight of various delicacies and outright food-crimes. Waiting for the picture to develop, I chatted with an institute participant, science teacher Lyla Allen. Looking at the developed picture below, I asked her, "Um ... here's a picture that doesn't have any people in it. Is there any way to use it for some science activities that also include writing?" Could she ever. I later typed her comments and displayed them along with the picture in the institute meeting room. Here's a slightly edited version of her suggestions:



### Food for Thought:

- Start by sorting the objects on the table: "living" vs. "nonliving"; polymers vs. nonpolymers.
- Describe the sources of the objects. Tell the "backstory," that is, how the objects wound up on the table. Pay attention to the geography, life cycles, and technology that brought them to market.
- Write their autobiographies. Take the point of view of a single molecule.
- Attend to the development of the object's nature or "personality" (e.g., its sweetness or its degree of ripeness).
- Tell the story of the object's future. Where does it go from here?

This impromptu exchange left us with a document that could be used by teachers and students studying any number of science-related topics.

There are other ways to use pictures with prompts. Here are two, developed by Mary E. Howell.

### Shoes:

- If the person taking the step in the picture below is invisible, what will the person do tomorrow?
- How did the person become invisible?





- What was the person in the picture planning to do before he disappeared?

Cat:

- What is the cat in the picture below writing about the objects surrounding it?
- Find a reason for the "cabin" of maple syrup to be included with this group of objects, which includes a miniature TV.
- What books would this cat be likely to read and why?



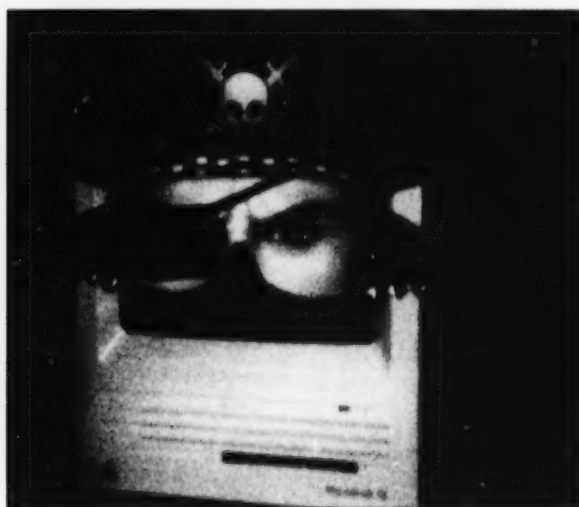
It's a great deal of fun (oh ... and it's educational, too) to figure out what pictures to take, what assignments fit which audiences, and how to complete someone else's "assignment." The instant-picture technology allows for fairly rapid testing of ideas and revision of visual prompts.

#### Photography as a Supplement to Writing

Photographs can not only serve as a prompt to writing, they can supplement and enrich it. When I was working with a group of English student teachers, introducing them to the use of computers for teaching writing, an idea occurred to me. I knew that people often develop "relationships" with their computers, often experiencing feelings about what I've come to call "the host in the machine." I decided to make the implicit explicit. Before the students arrived for the workshop, I used a book of large tear-out masks and affixed a different one to

each computer, giving each computer a different personality. After the student teachers arrived, I asked them to give their computers names and to write poems that elaborated and explored those names. They then took a picture of their masked computers.

Even though the students had only about ten minutes to do their writing, they came up with some extraordinary personalities, ranging from Queen Rom-Rom ("With magic she draws us") to Sleeps Standing Up ("There was a time when he slept at night"), to Get Even, inspired by a computer with a pirate's mask (see below):



#### Get Even

*I've escaped, you see, from Disney's cage,  
that computerized cacophony of fireflies and  
New Orleans and boats with incessantly curious  
fun-seekers and new sweatshirts.  
I am not angry with them,  
but my name says what I have to say to them.  
Get even.  
I say it with a stare.  
Get even.  
I back it with a pistol.  
Get even.  
I say it because it is all I can say.  
Get even.  
Because I am programmed to do so.  
Get even.  
Because that's where the wires take me.*

*Even the elasticity of my plastic skin cannot alter the course, as the boats in this ride cannot be altered.  
All I can say, over, and over and over again — until now,  
now when an English course has freed me from the warfare of wirefare—*

*I  
Get Even.  
I do not want to be there.  
I am not a pirate.  
I am not a skull-digger, or a looter like the South  
Central pirates.  
I simply get even.  
This poem is my way out.  
Now we're even.*

-Neal Modelevsky

Not everyone worked to capture in writing some of the qualities people ascribe to technology. That hardly mattered. What did matter was that the activity provided an occasion for evocative writing that helped make strange things familiar and familiar things strange. As the anthology of pictures and writing we distributed to participants makes clear, instant photographs enhance and document the written word.

I have described briefly here just a few activities inspired by the work of the NWP/PEP collaboration. Hundreds of other teaching ideas connecting photography and writing are now practiced in classrooms of Writing Project teachers. As a direct result of the NWP/PEP Alliance, more students and teachers are being encouraged both to show and tell as we learn to take a broader view of what is, after all, the language arts.

*Notes: In the next installment of this discussion, we'll see how Writing Project teacher researchers have combined photography with writing, exploring redefinitions of the teacher's craft and role.*

*Workshop leaders are provided by the PEP but are not company employees. Their fees are paid by the Writing Project site hosting a workshop, either from project funds or by charging a small registration fee.*

*Portions of this material have appeared in Portfolio 2000, published by the Polaroid Education Program, and in the journal The Writing Notebook and are used here by permission.*

*The masks were taken from Fun Faces: 15 Punch-Out Masks, by Pierre-Marie Valat (NY:E.P. Dutton), ISBN: 0-525-44544-7*

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## Location Writing

*continued from page 5*

This informal atmosphere contributed to liberating perceptions. By the end of the year the students assigned to "doorway, room 33" (our classroom), who had once felt a bit cheated, now allowed their perceptions to roam free. Liz looked up at the shrubs on the hillside, Brad looked into the room and drew geometric patterns of desks, walls, and file cabinets. Noah looked the opposite direction and made our room black and white, but used bright color for the burst of nature out the doorway. Lauren, who earlier had felt particularly chained in by the location, zoomed toward the large, venerable, blooming Ceanothus plant. Her drawing of the "doorway" was nothing but bright, purple blotches of Ceanothus flowers. It was lovely.

Like my students, I too brought a perspective to my seeing. I remember a sunny day last year. The class was outside and Simon was reading about his location. My attention was on a hummingbird hovering above as Simon angled through the English language. Other students also noticed the hummingbird, but Simon was so intent on his words he did not see it. It was the only thing he did not see.

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# Literature in the classroom, or "Say Not the Struggle Not Availeth"\*

by

JANE JUSKA



In 1960, Dr. James D Lynch, Professor of English at the University of California at Berkeley, exhorted those of us presumptuous enough to want to become English teachers to do the following: teach the best that has been thought and written to the greatest number of students. Over the next 32 years, my high school students and I rubbed up against the best that had been thought and written. It was not always a pleasant experience: this whole rubbing thing hurt if we kept at it too long, and sometimes we got rubbed raw enough to object loudly or, if that didn't work, to withdraw into sullen silence. But with every poem and every story and every novel we read together, we changed. I like to think we got bigger and smarter. That's what I like to think. But, as you will discover in the following excerpts from my journals, not everybody got smarter all the time including me. My journals I kept in the top right-hand drawer of my desk beneath Referral Forms, Library Passes, and Fire Drill Directions. Reading them every so often kept me grounded in the realities of the classroom which, though occasionally grim, I preferred to the realities of the faculty meeting or the lunchroom or the Language Arts Task Force or the Diversity Assembly or the Curriculum Committee or — grimmest of all — the Open Forum on the Tardy Policy ("We want your input"). The titles I have written as afterthoughts.

**"All We Know of Heaven and All We Need of Hell"**  
— Emily Dickinson

**January, period 4:** I have done the impossible. I have broken the spirit of up to 30 ninth graders, and together we have "done" *Romeo and Juliet*. I am exhausted, so are they. What is important here is that we stuck with it, and everybody had his say — not about racism or grades or Mr. Shepherd (the v.p.) or Now, but about what this line means, about what's going on here, about why someone does something and — this is the best — about the lines and passages they liked. We put our faces into the book and looked for a long time every day. Oh, sure I probably killed R & J again, and next year they'll probably moan and groan when their teacher announces Shakespeare and they'll say, "Not him again!" But I don't care. Maybe I'm getting a bit Bloomish; maybe I'm after some cultural literacy. Mostly, I'm after Focusing on Print. Dr. Bloom, baby, we're starting at the bottom in here. Actually, I'm proud of them. My kids who used to be fiends from hell are turning out to be angels from heaven.

**"Books are a load of crap"** — Philip Larkin

**Reading day, period 4:** Sharon is reading *Silas Marner* because her mom gave it to her for Christmas, and she doesn't have anything to read. On the other side of the

\*Arthur Hugh Clough, 1819-1861



room, Nakia sleeps behind *Cheerleaders*. Corinna reads a Harlequin romance; Kim, *You'll Never Eat Lunch in This Town Again*. Mark sleeps. leBrun "reads" *Satan*; Meshelle writes notes behind *Sybill*. Penny reads Danielle Steele in hard cover. Stacy forgot her book. Is this day worth anything?

**"By nature, analysis is plodding at best."** —John Ciardi

**February, period 3:** I'm mad, no, disappointed. "Oil Spill" (a poem) became another throwaway, something that has been a characteristic of my teaching career for 28 years. One change in the last five years, so I thought, is that I'm less inclined to throwaways. I have become more tenacious, more demanding of my students and myself. So now, here I go again, letting oil spill to no purpose. I dunno, that Canadian writer, Susan somebody or other, says, "Read 'em a poem." She wants us to let up on analysis. "Teachers have ruined more writers than alcohol," she says. Way back

I remember Pauline Kael telling an audience of English teachers, "You ruined literature; leave the movies alone." Still, "experiencing" language is like water on a duck's back. It's like watching TV since "experiencing" for all of us must be quick, immediate, and short-lived. So one reads or hears a poem — O.K., that's it, next? No, there has to be a middle ground, a place between the ocean and the boardwalk. O.K., finally a metaphor. It's the beach where we can wallow comfortably, where we can stretch out for a long time, where we can picnic, where we can play, where we can let our friends bury us — once in a while. That's what I want poems and stories and books to be for us — not a wave that splashes over us and is gone, yet not the hardness, the unyieldingness, the stiffness of the sidewalk. I want us to go to the beach and wiggle our toes in the sand.

**"Sometimes a Great Notion"** — Ken Kesey

**Period 5:** Kids read aloud from *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Everyone (!) intent on following the text. "I love Puck," whispers Ken to no one at all. "I want to be him."

**"It (literature) is a means of allowing us, through the imagination, to live more fully, more deeply, more richly, and with greater awareness."** — Laurence Perrine. **"And vice versa."** — me

**March, period 3:** We are writing for five minutes before we talk about Autumn's opinion that it's so yucky when a person gets beaten to death, like Mr. Freeman in *Caged Bird*, instead of shot. Shahrad reads what he has written. Well, Shahrad used to have a gun, but he sold it. We are fascinated: "How much did it cost?" "Did you ever fire it?" "What kind?" "Did you sell it to a teenager?" "Why did you buy it?" "Why did you sell it?" Shahrad is composed as he answers: "I sold it; I wanted something bigger." His eyes are a clear, gray-blue. He doesn't blink very often; his gaze is level, untroubled, cool. Shahrad is cool. He is what we've seen on TV. Shahrad is Living Color.

**"They (Plato and Aristotle) were absolutely one soul as they looked at the problem. This, according to Plato, is the only real friendship, the only real com-**

mon good. It is here that the contact people so desperately seek is to be found." —Allen Bloom

**February, period 5: *Metamorphosis*** (Kafka's): "Gregor's father is like us," says Sarah. "We make the homeless into drunks and bums because they make us feel guilty. Like we push the handicapped out of sight." "Yeah, like we say people on welfare are lazy," Jacob says. "It's like we do it to the blacks. Keep 'em in the ghetto cuz they shame us and then say well they don't deserve anything more, look how they act." I ask, "If the father is like us, who is Grete?" (Gregor's sister who replaces Gregor in the parents' hopes and dreams). A stunned silence of recognition. "Us," whispers Mike.

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*After too many years I had to acknowledge that "Why do we have to read this?" is the biggest question of them all and the only one that matters.*

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The relevance of *The Metamorphosis* is overwhelming except to Jennifer. Jennifer's head lies on the desk, a sign of what she thinks about having been assigned to read yet another piece of literature written by a dead white guy and a European at that. In fact, of course, she has not read it, and by the time the kids make the connection between Kafka and the treatment of our black citizens, Jennifer is asleep.

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Oh, boy, it's tough, this literature-based curriculum, especially for lifelong readers like teachers. I was always a reader, but then, as my kids sometimes said, "When you were our age, there wasn't anything else to do." That's true. Though if there had been, I would, I believe, still have found the comfort of solitude between the pages of a book. In its privacy, I was inviolate.

In college, reading went public: I was expected to write papers about books for professors who told me from their podiums on the stages of lecture halls what those books meant. They told me, and I believed them, that the books we were supposed to read dealt with the big questions of the human condition. And

they did. In my blue books, I told them what they said and I got rewarded. In four short years, I went from hermit to philosopher.

In graduate school, reading went Public. Reading became material to be defended, prosecuted, executed, and, sometimes, set free. In the courtroom of the graduate seminar, I argued the great questions of the human condition, ignoring what I truly believed, caring only that I won.

In the high school classroom, the game was up. The big questions disappeared: no one cared if Fate dictated our lives. No one gave a damn about the individual's role in society. No one even wanted to imagine that technology is bad for the human spirit. Big deal. What time do we get out of here?

All those big public questions that I had so loved to wrestle with, that had given me such pleasure, even an identity, disappeared. And in their place came, from the mouths of babes, over and over, the question: Why do we have to read this?

In the early years of my career, I would answer, "Because I say so," and "someday when you finish all the years of college I have, you can be the teacher, but until then ...." But the question persisted and got louder and louder until finally I had to listen. After too many years I had to acknowledge that "Why do we have to read this?" is the biggest question of them all and the only one that matters.

Literature in the classroom is so uncerebral, so utterly human: it depresses, it elevates, it frightens, it bores, it demands and liberates, it resounds with joy and despair. It's full of surprises, and so are the kids. It is rich with everything human and so are the kids. What better match?

So, yoo-hoo out there with your heads on your desks, your eyes out the windows, your backpacks ready for tripping, we read because the best that has been thought and written is about you. It is its own reason for being and so are you. It needs no apology and neither do you. Are you up to it? Yeah, but not everyday? And not just because the teacher says so. OK, it's a start.

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# How Enzymes Act: Skit Writing in Science Class

by

JOHN DORROH



Ten years ago enzymes that talk would not have been part of my biology curriculum. But that was before the National Writing Project came my way. The Project, through the Mississippi Writing/Thinking Institute, helped me create a classroom that revolved not around me, as in the past, but around my students. Before NWP came into my life, there were no class logs, no student-created metaphors and analogies, no allowance for students to write their own set of classroom expectations. I was a lecture-oriented science teacher, not the learner-researcher in my own classroom that I am today.

The other catalyst that inspired me to allow performing enzymes in my class was the Mississippi State Science Framework for Biology II. The Framework requires that students learn to "recognize the importance of enzymes — what they are, what they do, etc." Since our textbook did not include an overabundance of information about enzymes, I had to devise an alternative plan for students to learn this material, and out of this process evolved acting enzymes.

I began our enzyme-discovery journey by taking my students to the library to conduct independent research. Here — in science-based journals, on CD-ROM, and on videos — they found current information that went far beyond any textbook.

The next day I asked students to prepare Fact Sheets, each with a minimum of five facts about enzymes,

facts that had not been presented in the textbook. Some of the facts were useful but unsurprising:

*Enzymes have many jobs: regulating cellular functions, conducting nerve impulses, clotting the blood, contraction of muscle tissue, and photosynthesis.*

Others were surprising:

*In the honeybee enzymes in the stomach mix and change nectar into honey.*

And a few were pretty close to cutting edge:

*HIV protease is an enzyme produced by the HIV virus.*

How could we now get these pieces of research into a context where they could be shared by the class? I decided to ask students to tape their fact sheets to a sheet of large green chart paper. The sheets were numbered and spaced about two inches from one another, giving the appearance of a quilt. Each class had its own quilt.

Next, we had a silent walk around as students collected "clusters" of facts that seemed to be about the same topic — unusual uses of enzymes, chemistry of enzymes, human health and enzymes, and many other groupings. Of course, some students, unclear on the concept, dove in with complete abandon, collecting a hodgepodge of facts with no apparent relation to one another.

For the most part, however, all had gone well. Students had researched, shared and organized information about enzymes. But what now? I wasn't sure. Fortunately it was Friday so I had two days to figure out a way to pull all this together.

On Saturday afternoon I attended my monthly writers' group. As we generally do, we began by explain-

source of material. I distributed old copies of play books to pairs of students, pointing out the various components of the structure of a play: colons after each speaking character's name, skipped lines between speakers, parenthesis to indicate stage directions.

A few students were reluctant to begin the activity, reminding me that this was *not* an English class.



ing what's been going on in our lives since the last meeting, and school teachers naturally pour out stories about classroom activities.

"We're doing the neatest thing in one of my English classes," Annie, a language arts teacher, began. "I'm having the students rewrite parts of 'Romeo and Juliet' in their own language, using situations that are meaningful to them in their everyday lives." She went on to tell us the particulars, and as she did, my mind raced ahead.

*Skits, I thought. We can write skits as our closing activity!* I had dabbled with skit-writing before in the classroom but the finished products always seemed to lack substance. This time we *already* had substance — all of those wonderful facts, taped to big green sheets which were spending the weekend on the walls of Room 202.

On Monday I told my Biology II students that we were going to write skits, using the fact sheets for our

"What are you trying to do?" asked Nikki. I stopped to think. What *was* I trying to do? Was writing skits and plays going to advance my students to a new level of thinking about the content? Would it help them *truly* understand enzymes? And, the big question, what does it mean to "truly understand?"

"Nikki," I said, "I have an idea that having you to write skits about enzymes is going to help you focus on the content more than if I were just telling you about them."

Had my brief nutshell explanation satisfied her? Her expression told me that she might be halfway there. I continued. "Do you remember that poster on the bulletin board in the lab, the one next to the refrigerator?"

"No, I don't know which one you're talking about," she admitted.

So we walked into the lab to examine the poster with its red letters against a plain white background. An ancient Chinese proverb was inscribed on it: "Tell me, I forget; show me, I remember; involve me, I understand." We both read the words aloud a few times and I asked her what she thought.

She smiled. "Oh, it's good," she said. "And you know what?" she asked. "It just might work, writing these skits about science stuff."

So it wasn't long before all of my science students were engaged in skit writing: pulling in material from their fact sheets, adding additional facts from other classes' sheets, wondering out loud why their textbook had not included more information. I heard lots

of conversation about enzymes, arguments being artfully delivered, questions being asked, things such as, "Well, which is the more important molecule, DNA or an enzyme?" "Where did the first enzyme come from?" and "Why haven't I heard about them before?" The completed skits entertained us all, and more importantly demonstrated that students had processed what they had learned about enzymes (see box).

My success with acting enzymes prompted another skit-writing experiment. The following year I set out to jazz up my introduction-to-the-class activities. All of us know how beginning-of-the-year textbook introduction is usually done: the teacher issues the textbooks and then tells the students to turn to the Table of Contents. Typically I would then launch into a monologue that went something like this:

"Class, turn to the Table of Contents. (I wait while the students find the correct place.) This year we will go straight into Chapter One, where we will study all about the Scientific Method and famous scientists of the past. In Chapter Two we will begin our study of the cell. In this chapter we will do two labs and answer the questions at the end of the chapter. This book is really good because the questions really make you think ... blah, blah, blah..."

Although I do not consider our textbook the ultimate source of content for my classroom (as my enzyme unit demonstrates), I think it's got many terrific features that my students should be aware of. It's crammed full of hands-on activities and problem-solving situations for cooperative learning. By calling students' attention to the features of the text, I hoped to excite them about the content of the course and help them strategically use the book as a resource. But I knew that my monologue was not the most effective way to achieve these results—I needed to involve the students.

With these thoughts in mind I asked my students, in pairs, to take their textbook and turn to any chapter. "Go through that chapter and make a list of as many components of the text as you can," I said. "We'll define a component as *anything* that would help you to learn or me to teach." And then I wrote a few examples on the board to make sure that they understood what a component is: colorful pictures with captions, Chapter Preview, Concept Review and MiniLabs.

Here is a sample skit by Marlisia and Trenorris, slightly abridged.

An enzyme, Trenorris Hammond, is trying to break up the substance, Marlisia.

Enzyme Trenorris: Listen up substance! I am your worst enemy and I am determined to break you up!

Substance Marlisia: And how do you expect to do that?

Enzyme Trenorris: Well if you don't know, I am *maltase*, the enzyme that acts on you, *maltose*, the substance.

Substance Marlisia: Why, what did I do? And who do you think you are?

Enzyme Trenorris: Well, like I said, I am maltase, and you are maltose. We don't fit together. Therefore, I'll have to break you up whether you like it or not.

Substance Marlisia: Well, if I don't fit with you, why don't you just go away and leave me alone?

Enzyme Trenorris: Because you are slightly bent. This allows an easier break between your bonds and there is nothing you can do about it.

Substance Marlisia: Well, if there is nothing I can do about it, then tell me this, is that good or bad for me?

Enzyme Trenorris: Well it's bad news for you, but it's good news for the body we're both in.

Substance Marlisia: Are you sure there's nothing I can do about it?

Enzyme Trenorris: No, because when the bonds between the parts of the maltose molecules break, the two glucose molecules are released, leaving the active site of the enzyme ready to attack the molecule.

Substance Marlisia: Well, go ahead then, do what you have to do.

Most pairs of students easily compiled 15-25 components. Some identified as many as 40.

When the students had compiled a minimum of about 15 components, I offered the following scenario: "One of you is a textbook salesperson from Company X and it is your job to sell the textbook to the Head of the Science Department at your school, or to the principal, or to some other individual who is in charge of making decisions about the purchase of textbooks. The salesperson needs to call attention to the components that you and your partner have written as selling points for the book."

I reminded them that almost all of us have probably had experiences with sales people. "Think about how a salesperson might convince you to buy a new pair of shoes for basketball, or a certain dress. What selling points about their product did they use?"

I also threw in some questions for consideration that dealt with the personal interchange between the salesperson and the students in their past experiences: "Was the salesperson nice to you? Did he or she pressure you too much? Were you an easy sell, or did you put up some resistance? Incorporate some of these items into your skit," I urged. Once again, I was delighted with the results (see below).

Mrs. Garglemyer: I really don't have time to meet with you, so make it quick!

Mrs. Debingle: I'm sorry I have to take any of your time, but your time will be well spent if you will listen to me.

Mrs. G.: Well, make it snappy!

Mrs. D.: If I could direct your attention to page 150, the BioLab. You will notice the easy procedure and common materials the students can bring from home!

Mrs. G.: Well the old books from 1960 have BioLabs. I'm looking for something different and more realistic.

Mrs. D.: No problem, I've got your answer. The Broad View section on page 136 helps students see how Biology works in the real world. Also notice Biology and Society on page 153 which gives you applications for the future. Our books also have informative diagrams which help visual learners pick up concepts.

Mrs. G.: Hmmm, that's nice. Are my students going to injure themselves in any — as you call them, "realistic" — labs?

Mrs. D.: Why, of course not. Every lab has caution hints for the students to be aware of. The textbook also encourages teachers to take other safety precautions.

Mrs. G.: Yea, yea ... Everything sounds good, but the students are just performing experiments and writing lab reports. I don't see where the thinking process is coming into the picture. You know, Mrs. Debingle, we have to exercise our minds!

Mrs. D.: Yes, I realize that. Fortunately, our book has Thinking Labs like the one on page 145 which allow students to use the definitions and concepts they have learned to figure out experiments...."

Mrs. G.: You are beginning to convince me. Tell me more, and make it fast.

Mrs. D.: Well, the book has boldfaced words which draw your attention to what is important. Also, the words at the bottom identify the chapter and section.

Mrs. G.: Don't most all books have that?

Mrs. D.: Yes, but not like ours. Our book gives helpful hints on what you can do to save the earth.

Mrs. G.: Well, that's enough for me, Mrs. Debingle. Put in an order for my textbooks, and be on with your day.

Mrs. D.: I promise Mrs. G., you won't be sorry.



I have discovered that this skit-writing activity has several advantages. First, students have the opportunity to discover for themselves the architecture of our textbook. Second, they are working in pairs, immediately laying the groundwork for more extensive cooperative learning, including the formation of compatible lab groups. Third, I am engaging my students in an activity that lets me begin to assess their writing skills, and consequently their reasoning ability. Fourth, I give students yet another opportunity to see how science and language arts are interconnected.

I've incorporated skit writing in other parts of the curriculum as one method of getting students to reflect on content. We collect and file these skits for possible inclusion in a portfolio as documentation that the students are operating at a very high level of thinking.

Yes, I am happy about the way that students discover for themselves about enzymes and other equally fascinating science topics. And whenever I have mild and occasional doubts about the usefulness of this activity, I recall the image of Nikki reflecting in front of the Chinese proverb poster in the lab, and I can hear her say, "It just might work, writing skits about this science stuff."

*Author's note: I want to thank my friend and mentor, Bay Area Writing Project teacher-consultant Bob Tierney, who showed me one way toward a student-centered science classroom, heavy on writing.*

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## Stan Pesick Wins Miriam Ylvisaker Award

The 1996 National Writing Project's Miriam Ylvisaker Award for the best *Quarterly* article written by a classroom teacher has been awarded to Stan Pesick for "Writing History: Before and After Portfolios," published in the Winter issue. According to the selection committee, "Pesick's article was an example of the best kind of reflective thinking about teaching as it combined his own innovative practice from his history classroom with a practical and insightful application of educational research. More than most teachers, Pesick acknowledges the importance of theory and practice, and in a very readable fashion, demonstrates their interrelationship, using especially the work of Peter Seixas to help clarify what 'thinking historically' means, and how it applies to the work of his high school students. The article is enlivened by numerous samples of student writing as well as insightful commentary about those samples indicating both Pesick's appreciation of his students' work as well as insights

into how students might best learn history. Perhaps most appreciated was the open-ended exploratory tone of the article. Importantly, he left us with many more questions than answers. Like all fine teachers, Pesick realizes that part of what we do is ask important questions and listen to our students for possible answers."

The selections committee also acknowledged Alexa Stuart and her article, "Energy Conversion: The Evolution of Experimenters' Workshop" as an exemplary article describing a practical and innovative use of writing in the elementary classroom. "Of all the articles we read, the committee felt that Stuart's ought to be put directly into the hands of site directors, service coordinators, teacher-consultants, and all teachers who want to read about the sheer joy and exuberance of students who are learning science and using writing to foster their enthusiasm."



# Franklin and Whitman: Teaching for the Head and Heart

by

HOLLY STEIN

◆  
Holly Stein is  
director of the  
Puget Sound  
Writing Project.

As a teaching cadet back in 1986, I found myself subject to a bizarre and Byzantine evaluation form used by the University of Washington College of Education. (It has since been replaced.) The form was two pages long and had roughly 150 lines of traits the college expected to find in a "good" lesson, ranging from "reinforces on-task learners" to "organizes instruction effectively by using individual, small group, and total class instruction." I remember sitting with my advisor going over things which I had done, and which I had not done, after each observation. My job in that interview was mainly to advocate for myself and say, "Oh yes, I did that." The woman who evaluated me seemed as overwhelmed by filling out the form as I was by trying to be all things to all people in a one hour class period. The form reflected the empirical mentality of our age, in that all the assessment items were stated in terms of action verbs, which had the effect of making these mostly subjective items appear objective, fair and just. For example, "encourages learner involvement" could mean telling jokes, or making everyone take notes, or going around saying good morning to everyone. Beyond that you have to ask, "involved in what?" Are they involved in being happy in the class or are they involved in the message and meaning of *The Merchant of Venice*? Words like "encourages" and "effective" are subjective. But somehow if evaluative criteria are on a chart with a numerical rating system and boxes to check, they seem accurately measured. After all, you end up with a score!

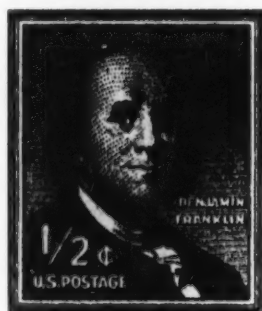
When I worked at the City of Seattle Department of Human Resources as a grant manager and liaison between the City and the emergency shelter and food bank systems, I had to make up job descriptions using action verbs for myself and for all the people at the shelters and food banks with whom I worked. I also had to quantify the agencies' services into measurable units for reimbursement reasons and for accountability. It is axiomatic that when the public and certain political interests increase their concern for accountability, the reaction of the government is to quantify. It's clean. The Civil Service System and the legal system also play a part in the rationale for this setup: government can only fire people for "objective" reasons, and to do this a vast paper trail must document all personnel actions.

The dilemma here, as with other action verb systems, is the qualitative element. Some people can't get along with anyone. Some lack the quickness and ability to do a job. Some have lost their drive and skate along doing the least they can. Some have emotional problems and can't handle simple jobs without a lot of help and emotional reinforcement. But these qualities are tough to measure. Some people break all the rules and policies, especially in emergency shelters late at night, and do a wonderful job. This performance is also difficult to quantify. Quality is illusive, hard to pigeonhole. Quantifying is tidier and dominates evaluation for most school and government activity.

According to the old evaluative forms, a good teacher will have a lesson plan with objectives and goals, probably written out; will have some practice for new material; will use cooperative learning; and will make lesson plan accommodations for accelerated students and for those with learning disabilities, handicaps, and language difficulties. There is also a form that has been used to track the minute by minute events during the observation. In the past teachers have been scored on the number of times they called on a student, the attractiveness of the bulletin boards and on the lack of litter on the floors of the room.

A Spanish teacher I know does all the things on this evaluative sheet swimmingly and is, in fact, a wonderful teacher, sought after by many students because they "really learn" in her class. She teaches a highly structured, objective-driven class with all the elements of the ITIP program, so popular some years back. This works really well for her, and I'm sure she has always received stellar evaluations. Another teacher is a gifted lecturer and dramatic interpreter of literature — which he loves — and reads five books a week himself. This man always lectures, and does the same lectures practically on the same day every year. Whether teaching accelerated students or students with learning differences, he does the same thing. Homework is always the same — write one page and keep up with the reading. The students have to write on either a personal topic or about the literature. There is no prewriting or revision. Certainly there are no writing groups. He does none of the things on that evaluation list, and students think he is a wonderful teacher. No doubt, he is. Other teachers at the school are Writing Project alumni and teach using varying degrees of process and student driven curriculum. Students enjoy the freedom to explore ideas and write poetry, essays, and journals on topics they often choose. The process-oriented teachers are very well respected and their classes are always full. These teachers, however, do not tend to have a specific objective for a class period with guided practice and measured levels of improvement to judge success. The teaching tends to have longer term objectives and more qualitative than quantitative measures. Yet the same teacher evaluation form or format will be used by administrators for all three styles of teaching.

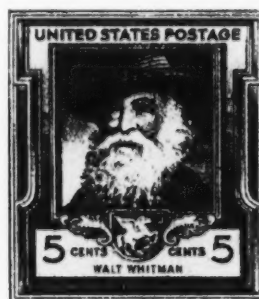
Which is the correct model? Who will fare well on the evaluation? The teacher of reason, logic, and sequential lessons? The more contemporary process teachers? Or the teacher who is a one man show, harkening back to the master-apprentice paradigm many insist is an anachronism? Who is right? Who has the lock on the truth? Why is there no seeming consistency to good teaching?



# Viewpoint

To examine this conundrum in terms of philosophy, we could see this as a tension between two major forces in American culture: the work ethic of Benjamin Franklin and the passion ethic of Walt Whitman. Ben Franklin is the most relevant philosophical precursor for the common evaluative tool. Franklin made lists of ways to improve himself, based primarily on finding ways to eliminate the seven deadly sins (pride, vanity, sloth, gluttony...), and then set out to work daily to correct his behaviors and attitudes. Very

logical. He kept charts like those available for time management or those found in Learning World to track student work. Franklin was organized and methodical and no doubt inspirational to many.



Others hear a different drum — the heartbeat. Passion is the keynote for Walt Whitman and we can

see this in *Leaves of Grass* where he celebrates his love affair with humanity. His vision is one of a beautifully imperfect world we hold in common and should enjoy to the fullest. "I celebrate myself, and sing myself, and what I assume you shall assume, for every atom belongs to me as good belongs to you." Like a pearl necklace we are individually unique and beautiful and we are made even more precious by our connection to other pearls, metaphorically creating a necklace of humankind. Whitman, defying order, says he cannot be tamed or translated. "I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world." Vanity? Pride? Lack of industry? His call is to experience, to the ethic of passion.

Another way to consider this question is from the perspective of the National Writing Project model. Prescriptions for effective teaching ought not to be static and limiting. Good teaching evolves; teachers

learn best and grow stronger from their contact with one another and with what they love: their teaching areas. Each summer in the Puget Sound Writing Project Summer Institute, we have 24 unique, talented teachers participate in the program. They do not become transformed people over the summer; they often work out some self-defined questions or problems and grow in passion. They do not become other people; if anything, they discover more about their own authentic selves. Both head and heart are nurtured. Looking around the PSWP classroom it is abundantly clear that good teachers don't fit some

preordained mold and that they must stay true to themselves as people. We see Ben Franklins, Walt Whitmans, Oprah Winfreys, Joan Baezes, and Larry Birds. They have some things in common, but usually not things you can measure with numbers or check off on a checklist. Passion is certainly a common denominator, but teachers are practical people, too. Passion needs to translate to the audience in the classroom — the student. This brings to light the real question that teacher evaluations ought to address — where will the students learn? The path to the student can follow many roads.

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## *Letter to the Editor*

Dear Editor,

In response to Lisa Orta's article, "Real World Feminism: A Teacher Learns from her Students' Writings," I am sending you a copy of a poem I wrote:

If I Were a Man — But I'm Not  
by Laura Cobrinik

If I were a man  
I'd say,  
"Honey, you are my gem  
My precious gem —  
A ruby ... pearl ... diamond  
All three in one!"  
I wouldn't wear heels  
Or mini-skirts  
But rather  
Brown or black Endicotts  
And a classic suit,  
Narrow stripe tie,  
A white or pale blue  
Button down shirt  
Ironed, pressed,  
Lightly starched, right from the box.  
I'd look like I stepped  
Right out of Brooks Brothers.

If I were a man  
We'd celebrate each Friday night,  
The Sabbath Eve —  
"Honor Thy Sabbath Queen."  
Then, Saturday night  
I'd take you out on the town  
We'd eat by candle-light,  
Dance all night  
Polka, ... rumba ... cha, cha, cha!  
We'd fit in the hora too  
Then end with a slow waltz  
By the Dorsey Band.  
If I were a man—  
But ... I'm not—  
I'm a woman!  
This is the kind  
of man I want—  
A romantic ...  
Man with a heart!

# Logorrhea or The Dangers of Unprotected Lex: Confessions of a Word Junkie

by

CHARLES WATERWORTH



Long before Baltimore had its National Aquarium or Harbor Place or Camden Yards ball park with its statue of Babe Ruth sporting a right-hander's glove, I was born on Carroll Street, just a few minutes' walk from these illustrious sites, via Pratt Street west and Washington Boulevard angling toward the southwest. Carroll Street, named after a signatory of the Declaration of Independence, is a narrow, canyon-like array of three-story, red-brick row houses typical of Baltimore. Just a few hundred feet down and across the street from my front steps on the southwest corner of Barrie and Carroll Streets stands a ponderous, old, burnt-brown brick structure that used to house a branch of the Enoch Pratt Free Library. My proximity in childhood to this venerable structure and later to its even more hallowed sister on Hollins Street was probably the master stroke of fate in my life. For better or worse, I was to become an imbibor of books and an obsessive wielder of words. At best, the library and literacy saved me from the straits of the streets — I was to become *paroler* instead of a parolee. At worst, I became afflicted with chronic — at times acute — logorrhea. Its milder forms manifested no more than occasional, innocuous, erudite exorbitances, but its potentially fatal, febrile stages were capable of producing vile suppurations of purulent and prurient puns, ailing alliteratives, and asinine assonances.

My mother, father, two older sisters and older brother had known stable and prosperous times, but my birth inaugurated a precipitous decline in the family fortunes as three more baby girls came in quick succession. My father lost his laundry business, severe and violent hostilities erupted between my parents, the crisis exacerbated by their abuse of alcohol and my father's gambling at the horse tracks. My two older sisters escaped into marriage, and we younger children were neglected and abused in turn, especially me, since my dad, through some recondite reasoning of his own, reckoned me the cause of the catastrophe. Such a dysfunctional family setting was bound to predispose me to neurotic, addictive behavior, and I so became a verbal and substantive abuser.

That little library on the corner became my refuge and my solace and initiated me into weighty words. I don't recall ever being taken there, though I probably accompanied my older sisters at first and then found my way in my meanderings well before matriculating into elementary school. I can still see vividly the children's corner with its low shelves of large, thin picture books, the wide, low, dirty-blond tables and diminutive chairs. I can see precisely where the dinosaur books were and those on the heavens, for these were my first great loves. Rapturously, I pored over the artists' renderings of great beasts lumbering



through their primeval landscapes, rending each other in titanic conflicts; and swirling galaxies, and planets, and worlds being fractured or pulverized by comets and colossal meteors. I reveled in this imaginary chaos all the more that a real chaos fermented just on the other side of those monumental walls. This was sanctuary: safe, quiet, orderly, predictable, and the rules were clear. This little universe of books and words became my real world. (And to boot, it was always cooler in the oppressive Baltimore summers!)

During these preschool years, I made a pest of myself, asking librarians or older children to read the words to me, practicing over and over the pronunciation of the tremendous names of creatures and celestial bodies. "Brontosaurus" was an early favorite: I felt the full "bront" of this beast's fulminations before I learned that it was "thunder lizard!" "Andromeda Nebula" tripped on my tongue, reverberated in the mind's ear, and I would go off nibbling "nebulae."

**neb•u•la** (něb'yá-lá) *n., pl. neb•u•lae* (-lē') or **neb•u•las**.

1. *Astronomy. a.* A diffuse mass of interstellar dust or gas or both, visible as luminous patches or areas of darkness depending on the way the mass absorbs or reflects incident radiation. **b.** See **galaxy**.
2. *Pathology. a.* A cloudy spot on the cornea. **b.** Cloudiness in the urine.
3. A liquid medication applied by spraying — **neb'u-lar** *adj.*

I "read" widely, but science was my main fare, and I became enthralled, at about the end of WW II, with a prodigious book on military science which covered most of the surface of a table when opened and laid flat. One double page displayed a vast field of Japanese soldiers in training, with bayonet practice here, judo there, target practice further on, little red bursts of gunnery fire on the horizon, and much more besides. I delighted in the exquisitely tiny painted figures with their panoply of minute accouterments and rifles with ever-so-delicate little splinters for bayonets. I wanted to know the nomenclature of every iota of detail and fretted if someone couldn't tell me something.

Of course, my verbal education was not confined to the library; I learned the inevitable lessons of the streets. One day some boys — they seemed adults to me, but they may have been in their early teens or even prepubescent — asked me to repeat some particularly choice words and phrases. Each time I uttered one, they were seized with paroxysms of laughter. I found myself center stage and my little soliloquy the whole bill, and I was happy, the ham in me manifesting. On the way home, I performed for everyone I met, with perplexing results. Some laughed, shaking their heads; some frowned.

One man with a disquieting tone and expression said, "Okay, sure kid, ca'meer."

I hurried on. The next man threatened me with a good thrashing. I sensed that something was amiss, so I went directly home and asked my mother what a certain word meant. Without warning, she whacked me across my mazard, knocking me to the floor, bawling, "Don't you ever let me hear you say that word again!"

Through my tears I insisted on an explanation, but none was proffered, only her repeated admonition. Clearly, this was a powerful word, indeed! I gleaned a few more strong verbs from the streets and many more nouns unmentionable here — but I learned to be more discriminating in their use.

I began really to read at George Washington Elementary, School Number 22, just around the corner. I relished sitting on the little square chairs before the big flip charts, enunciating the words as the teacher methodically flapped the rubber tip of her pointer against each one. I especially delighted in stories, one particularly about a happy little bayside village with blithe little boys and girls perennially rolling hoops down Gay Street, which descended steeply to the blue bay with a few jauntily tacking white sails far on the horizon and white gulls flecking bluewashed skies. All was bright and fresh, breezy and pure. When we got to regular books, my favorite was the adventures of little Toot, that brave little tugboat (with whom I deeply empathized) who seemed always called upon to heave gargantuan black-hulled, seagoing behemoths against monstrous, glowing waves. As my reading skills advanced, my



interest in the afternoon story hour at the library intensified as I anticipated reading on my own the fairy tales I heard. I sat on the floor hanging on every word and gesture of the reader, captivated not quite so much by the machinations of Rumpelstiltskin and the plight of Rapunzel as by their wondrous names (which I began to assign to my friends and pets). But oh, how I grieved when I went to the shelf from whence these golden nuggets were mined and took down one of these embossed tomes only to find that I could decipher as yet very little of the densely-packed ranks of minuscule words.

One day at school I told my teacher that I had put some brushes in the "zink." She corrected me, and I struggled with "sszink," then "zzssink," momentarily getting "sssink," then lapsing again to "zink," the usage of my family. I began to be self-conscious about my ordinary speech, seeing that it was not as good as my teacher's. My mother had only a sixth-grade education, and I dimly began to understand that she spoke a local patois, saying, besides "zink," "pockeybook" for "pocket-book," "valcum" for "vacuum," and more besides. My father, having a private high school education, spoke with more precision. I consciously began to imitate him, though he too had his linguistic peculiarities.

He would say, "Take this fin and get me a pack of Camels and some soup herbs for your mother." (I was quite surprised later to find what my "sooburbs" were).

One evening he came home with a few beers in him, made the round of the table poking us kids in the ribs, eyeing my mother impishly, saying, "Mudders eat foddors."

I was vaguely uneasy with what sounded like some crudity from the street, and my mother scolded him for using such language before the children. With mock indignation, my father protested he said nothing wrong.

Years later, I understood that a "mudder" is a horse that runs well on a wet track, and that "fin," and much else of his diction came from the language of race tracks and gambling. But often my father seemed to

mean more than he said, and my mother frequently remarked, with an air of disgust, that my father could talk himself out of any difficulty. So I began to consciously imitate much of his language and style.

**grub** (grŭb) *v.* **grubbed, grub-bing, grubs.**

**-tr.**

1. To dig up by or as if by the roots.
2. To clear of roots and stumps by digging.
3. *Slang.* To obtain by importunity.

**-intr.**

1. To dig in the earth.
2. **a.** To search laboriously by or as if by digging, rummage. **b.** To toil arduously; drudge.

**-grub** *n.*

1. The thick, wormlike larva of certain beetles and other insects.
2. A drudge.
3. *Slang.* Food. **-grub'ber** *n.*

His favorite term of contempt was "jerk," and he elucidated it with a ferocity that seared it and sealed it into my brain, and I saved it for special occasions. (Recently, while riding my bike, I had a confrontation with a car over the right-of-way. The case called for my prudently acceding, but I fatuously maintained my course. Horn blowing and the usual obscenities I would have disdained, but the driver's short, sharp "Jerk!" deflated and withered me utterly.)

Another peculiarity of my father's was his refusal to use the family's proper names. I was usually "Chum," my older brother by a year-and-a-half was "Buzzard." My sisters were "Sis" or "Gal"; my mother he usually just called "Woman." I enjoyed using my father's names and became adept at striking the right tone, especially to call my brother "Buzzard," as it always got his dander up. He would retort with, not "Chum," but "You Chump!" as if trying to give this feeble riposte more force.

For him, "Chump" had a potency that was lost on me, and his unwavering devotion to it bemused and amused me, to his greater frustration. I considered myself to have administered the *coup de grace* in our disputes with my final, acerbic "JERK!"

This growing addiction to my father's style of word play led to dangerous behavior. I dared to call my mother "Woman" a time or two, to her irritation. I tested this risky behavior to the brink once after latching onto the word "wench" from a movie (I think it was spoken by Wallace Beery of Long John Silver fame). In a linguistically flippant mood, I came home from the Eureka Theatre, just around the corner, and sprawled insouciantly on a chair at the kitchen table behind my mother as she prepared dinner.

Merging my new word with a typical expression of my father's, I scowled, "Whip me up some grub, wench. I'm hungry."

I thought I was being witty and expected no more than a snort, maybe a begrudging shrug, or any mild acknowledgment, but my mother whirled upon me, raging.

"Who do you think you are talking to, you little snot?!"

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***This growing addiction to my father's style of word play led to dangerous behavior.***

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Taken off-guard by the vehemence of her response — I was usually more wary at such a venture in the volatility of my home — I failed to move before she grabbed me by the hair, her favorite hold. In desperation I yanked free (leaving tufts of hair in her clenched fist), scrabbled frantically around the table and bolted out the door and down the corridor.

She wailed after me, "Yooooo wait till your father comes home, boy! You'll get a whipping, all right, you rip!"

I doubt that anyone facing imminent hanging or electrocution and unreconciled to his fate could be in more terror than I was, as in *extremis*, I awaited the arrival of my father. I considered whether I should just wet my pants then and there and get that over with at least or hold on and release at the first sound or sight of him, as was usual when I expected a beating.

He appeared, and I held my bladder (I was growing up). My mother, with my eldest sister in attendance for the looming spectacle, complained of my outrage. To my horror, my father just laughed and passed it off. I say "horror" because his most insidious stratagem was to feign indifference to an affront, lure the offender into complacency, and then strike with sudden impact the unprepared soul. But after inquiring about the state of dinner preparations, he went off to his easy chair chuckling softly to himself and — and this was significant — unfolding his paper. I sensed the matter was at an end.

Nevertheless, I unclenched only gradually, and the enormity of what had happened began grow upon me. For the first time ever that I was aware of, I had said something in the way of purposely being funny that made my father laugh. It was usually far otherwise. I had used a word he could appreciate, spoke his idiom, and incensed my mother. (Did he see a chip off the old block?) It seemed to me at this time the ultimate verbal act, and I was already, at this early age, forming the megalomaniacal notion that I could do anything with words.

*Charles Waterworth is a teacher consultant with the Kennesaw Mountain Valley Writing Project and an instructor at Kennesaw State College.*

# Muscle Car English

by

JOANNE DOWD



It's after four o'clock on a Monday afternoon in March and Jay and Brandon are still at school. Of course, they have stayed at school into the late afternoon before, but this time they are not serving detention. Rather they are standing with me in the computer director's office at the high school, learning a new skill that has relevance to both English class and life: how to send a fax. They'll need to write and send lots of faxes if they are going to pass English this semester because Brandon and Jay have opted out of a traditional junior English class and voted to take on an "independent study unit" — planning a muscle car show — as a way to learn English.

Independent study is an option that has evolved as a component of our school's philosophy: every student can learn. Despite our location in an impoverished rural community in southern Maine, our school has the highest graduation standards of any school in the state. We require our heterogeneously-grouped students to pass four years of English in order to graduate. They may retake any classes they have failed until they earn enough credits to graduate. Jay and Brandon were not having an easy time earning these credits.

Brandon, a long-haired, black leather-jacketed junior, challenged me on the first day of 11th grade English class with, "Hi, my name is Brandon and I'm going to fail this class." His buddy Jay, technically a senior, a diehard hunter wearing a red bandanna and a red and black plaid wool jacket, was attempting to make up sophomore, junior and senior English all at once in a last ditch effort to graduate. Both students faced many problems outside of as well as in school, substance

abuse among them, and both were considered "at risk" for failing and dropping out.

Before Brandon and Jay came along, taking independent study from me meant "here are my ideas; choose one" rather than "find your own idea." Not to say my units were not thoughtful and challenging. They included books and articles to read, activities to complete, and a culminating activity that included a panel of invited guests to whom the student made a presentation. The topics were varied and ostensibly high interest to students, subjects such as cars, tolerance, and women's rights. However, in previous years Brandon and Jay completed all of my units that held any interest for them. Now they wanted to create their own project.

They wanted to host a muscle car show. Although "muscle car" was not a term I counted as part of my cultural literacy lexicon, I was swept up by their enthusiasm. "Go ahead and try it," I said.

According to the two students, a muscle car was an American-made car, 20 years or older but preferably from the late 60s, and best of all a T-bird or a Mustang. They explained there was an entire culture built up around these cars. They wanted to explore this culture and expose others to it. "Muscle cars were a part of American culture in the sixties, just like disco in the seventies," said Brandon.

Now that I had committed myself to the idea, I was getting a little nervous. How could a car show possibly be a project for English class? I went back and looked at my major skill goals for the junior English curriculum: students will become more engaged,

thoughtful readers, better writers, and more effective communicators. I was not worried about the communication. They would need to negotiate time and space with the principal, arrange for approvals and advertise the event. But I wanted to let them know that they would also need to include sufficient reading and writing to pass the project and the quarter.

They agreed to keep a list of resources they used to find out more about muscle cars and to read a piece of car-related fiction, *Christine* by Stephen King. In addition, Brandon read Lee Iacocca's autobiography. Both read some short nonfiction pieces about cars that another teacher and I were able to find. I had to do some arm-twisting to make this happen. Both were avid nonreaders and it was hard to convince them of the importance of this reading for their success in this class as well as in life in general. But these readings were nonnegotiable. They accepted this condition, and to my delight they even volunteered to read Chilton's car manuals as well as several magazines about cars.

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***They hustled in to class, put down their belongings and within seconds were waving a pass in my face to go measure the parking lot, talk to the assistant principal, hang posters, and call radio stations.***

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For writing, I insisted they keep a weekly interactive journal with me, describing their progress and learning as well as any reactions to their readings. They would also write press releases, and write a grant application for money to buy trophies for the prizes. I pushed them to write business letters to the big three American car manufacturers and ask for information about these vintage cars. Any information they received from the companies would also become part of their reading. In one of our short daily meetings, they agreed to allow me to proofread for spelling and grammar any posters to advertise the event. I was able to convince them that the more professional their advertising attempts were, the more likely people were to show up. In addition, the boys spoke of creating a car video to music.

I didn't see much of Jay and Brandon in the next several weeks. This was not because they were cutting class, as probably would have been true first semester. Rather they hustled in to class, put down their belongings and within seconds were waving a pass in my face to go measure the parking lot, talk to the assistant principal, hang posters, and call radio stations. Because they were known as two notorious class cutters and hall wanderers, they were stopped often in the first few weeks of the project, but after a while their purpose became apparent and staff members began to trust the two more often. One staff member, the study hall monitor, even sought me out to publicly praise the two for their appropriate behavior and newly developed sense of purpose.

Unfortunately, there was little carry-over from this project into these two students' other classes. Jay made little effort in his other two English classes, and Brandon came to school consistently only for my class. Since our classes met every other day, he wouldn't even bother coming to school on the days he didn't have English.

One day as I was teaching ninth grade English, Brandon and Jay came rushing into the room. Speaking over each other, they exclaimed, "You'll never guess what happened!" "Mr. Drouin saw one of our posters. He came and found us and talked to us about the project. He was really psyched. He used to collect muscle cars! He gave us these trophies he won a few years ago! Aren't they cool? Now all we have to do is get new plates put on them." Another "teachable moment" emerged: thanking those who'd gone out of their way to help.

There were, predictably, down times during the preparation — Brandon and Jay were discouraged that students kept tearing their posters off the wall and several "fake" entries were submitted to the show. Experiencing this, the two vowed never to tear another poster off the wall, sign up using a fake name for someone else's project, or generally disrespect someone else's hard work.

And they did work hard. However, they weren't inclined to share their work with the other class members. They had opportunities to use other students in the room for feedback and suggestions, but, as is typical of most students doing independent studies, they chose to not to work, even in a cursory way, with other members of the class.

After several weeks of preparation, the Saturday of the event dawned cold and windy — April in Maine. I stopped by the show as I had promised the boys I would. They stood alone, Brandon huddled in his black leather jacket and Jay in his usual hunting attire next to their card table full of trophies which had been relabeled for the show with the help of a \$42.00 donation from the principal.

As soon as I arrived, the boys rushed over and gave me the receipts for the trophies, as well as their receipts for gas for the judges. They were very proud to have kept track of such small pieces of paper for so long.

Only two cars and a small handful of audience members showed up for the car show. The small group of us gave appropriate attention to the two cars, one a sleek black and the other a sunshine yellow.

As we stood huddled in the wind, Brandon and Jay weren't the least bit discouraged. In fact, they were already plotting ways to put on a second, better show. The two car owners who did show up had attended other shows and advised the boys that they should charge an entrance fee and offered cash prizes. Then people might take their event more seriously. The boys were eager to try again.

I was amazed. I know that if I had planned an event and had worked as hard as these two did, I certainly would have been much more disappointed than they were. A thought occurred to me: these kids had never been "successful" in school. Were they more comfortable with failure than success? Yet perhaps they understood that on another level they had not failed. Who would ever have predicted that these two young men would voluntarily give up a precious Saturday to spend at school?

Armed with a new enthusiasm, Brandon and Jay sent out a new round of press releases. They decided to charge an entrance fee. This time they made more professional-looking posters: bigger, brighter and stenciled. They also managed to get an announcement out onto the local cable channel.

Between the first and second car shows, report cards came up. Both Jay and Brandon had earned an "A" in English, a first for both of them. The "A" came from me, themselves and a panel of "neutral" judges (faculty members) who judged the boys' process as well as their product and talked with them at length about their learning. These panel members felt that the "life" learning the boys were able to articulate went well beyond the curriculum and deserved to be recognized.

Jay went home and shared with his parents his success. He came in the next morning practically in tears. "Ms. Dowd," he said, "I went home and told my parents about my grade."

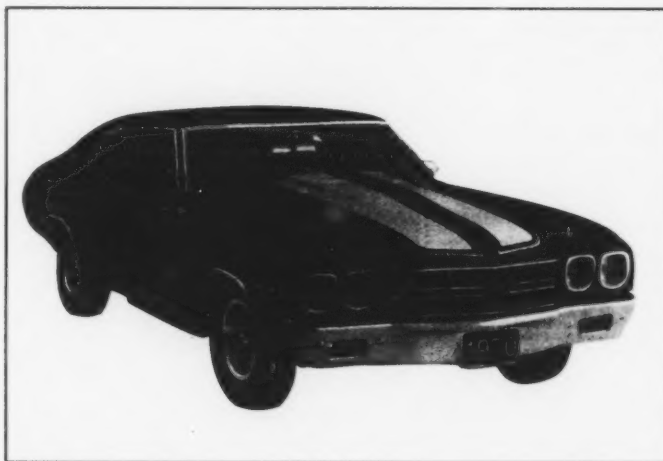
"Oh yeah — I bet they were proud!" I responded.

"Nah," he said. "First they wouldn't believe me and then they didn't even care."

"Well, you know you did it, and I know you did it, and that's what's important," was all I could think to say.

"Yeah, I guess," he mumbled as he walked away.

The Saturday of the car show: take two came, and only three cars showed up. There were no spectators. This time the two weren't quite as ready to be cheerful about their lack of success. They were frustrated. I didn't know quite how to respond to them. They packed up their things and went home. What was left to say?





We had a talk after the event and the boys, when asked what they had learned from the experience, reeled off a long list of things they had come to know. Brandon said, "I realized that adults are not always the enemy. Before this, I thought all adults were out to get me and make my life miserable. From this I learned that if I treat them with respect, they will treat me the same way back. People were really cool to us and very helpful." Jay chimed in, "I learned that it is OK to ask for help — I never asked for help before."

Ironically, from a teacher's point of view, I would say that one of the reasons their project "failed" was that the two wouldn't ask for, or accept, help. They wanted to do it completely on their own and overlooked several steps in the planning process that could have helped their event be more successful: making sure there weren't any other major events in the area on that day (their second show was in competition with an antique auto show the next town over), working harder on getting the word out in the community, and offering folks some way to sign up. However, in their minds, as I learned from our panel discussions, their journal entries and end-of-the-unit evaluations, they had asked for help more on this project than with any other previous work in their education.

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***When we choose to include real world experiences in our classrooms, the results are rarely predictable and the learning can come from, and go, nearly anywhere.***

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They did end up with a music video that was done fairly well with shots of muscle cars and car songs in the background. They had researched lyrics of car songs and interviewed "old" staff members (anyone over thirty) about their memories of songs, movies, and television shows featuring cars such as *American Graffiti* and *Starsky and Hutch*. Their video ended up consisting of clips of chase scenes from early 70s movies like *The French Connection* and *Bullitt* cut with still shots of scale models of muscle cars that Jay's uncle collected. Car songs from the Beach Boys to Van Halen filled the sound track.

Fourth quarter, Brandon and Jay launched a second independent study project: building a three quarter life-size model of a muscle car. About halfway through the model-building, Jay hit the end of the line with school. He left to be a lumberjack in Northern Maine, the official profession of all the male members of his family.

On the day he left, he sought me out to say good-bye. He shook my hand, looked me in the eye and said, "I wanted you to know I learned a lot in your class. It was cool. Thanks." Brandon limped along in my class until the end of the year, halfheartedly working on the model car without Jay. He learned some things about welding and become temporarily enthused about opening an auto shop with some friends after graduation. He has since left school also. I have run into both students since they dropped out. In both cases, the car show was one of the first topics they mentioned. Both are attempting to graduate through night school, and Brandon mentioned trying to get into an excellent alternative school in northern Maine.

As a teacher, I think a lot about success. It's a tenuous concept that slithers out of my grasp each time a new student with individual needs walks through my door.

Maybe in the "old days" it was easier to define success — a certain number of correct answers on multiple choice tests, the successful completion of several courses, and you were out the door, on your way to the real world. Somehow things are so much more complicated now and to use an old-fashioned, standard definition of success seems a grave error. At the same time, it is vitally important to expect a great deal from students. Our challenge as teachers is to allow the real world to intrude, to encourage Brandon and Jay to do their car show, while at the same time holding onto high standards.

When we choose to include real world experiences in our classrooms, the results are rarely predictable and the learning can come from and lead nearly anywhere. Sometimes the lessons aren't even realized until years later.

My experience with Brandon and Jay provoked again my nagging questions about success. Was this project successful? People didn't come to their car show. Twice. Although they were learning on many levels,

both Jay and Brandon still ended up leaving school. What does success in school mean for students — especially ones who are hard to reach? Ones whose experiences have become a pattern of failure? I could have intervened a lot more during the process, requiring more, but that wasn't how they operated — they wouldn't have done the requirements I imposed, and it wouldn't have been their project.

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***My experience with Brandon and Jay provoked again my nagging questions about success. Was this project successful? People didn't come to their car show. Twice.***

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I look back on times when I could have given specific suggestions. For instance, their first round of posters looked like a first grader had made them, and I allowed the two to post them anyway. Knowing the stubborn nature of these students, and knowing how poorly they reacted to teacher-directed learning, I kept silent. The shows may have turned out more successfully had they heeded some advice, yet would they have learned as much? Would they have seen the project through to completion?

At the end of this experience, I am left with nagging questions. Did I do my job well as an English teacher? Are these two young men better readers, writers and communicators because of their work with me? By allowing them to remain in a realm where they felt comfortable, did I fail to push them into new ways of thinking or looking at the world? How much learning and what kind of learning counts as success? Was what the students accomplished in this class a jumping off point for future learning? On a good day I can justify our work by convincing myself I tried as hard as I could to reach two very difficult students. On other days I still find myself searching for the magical formula that is going to make every student want to learn what I feel is important for them to know.

This experience also begs questions about schools and how they are structured. There was no true vehicle for these students to work best within their

area of interest, expertise and learning style. We made a "force fit" into the English curriculum.

If our school had a different kind of structure, if we weren't locked into eighty minute blocks days divided into content areas with specific curriculum for each, I could perhaps have worked with Brandon and Jay, using this experience as a "jumping off place" for other kinds of learning: math, science, economics, ecology. But we're not quite there yet. At this point, I am left frustrated by this "almost success" and wondering, as we all are in schools that are restructuring, what are our next best steps?

*JoAnne Dowd is a ninth-grade humanities teacher at Noble High School in Berwick, Me, and a participant in the NH Writing Project.*

# Creating Work of their Own: Skills and Voice in an Eighth-Grade Research Project

by

ROBERT ROTH



DeShawn stood by my desk, worried about his research paper: "I just don't get this thing about the bibliography. I was out when you taught the class how to do it." Busy with other things, slightly distracted, I told him, "Don't worry about it yet. Just do your report." "But I can't do it until I understand the bibliography," he insisted. I assured him that the bibliography was really the smallest section of the report and that I'd explain it to him soon. Two days later, he stayed after class and in a firm voice told me he needed to know about the bibliography right then and there. "Listen, Mr. Roth, my paper is on Shaquille O'Neal. It's the story of his life. So the whole thing is a bibliography. Why should it go at the end of the paper? It's got me real confused."

I stared at him blankly, bouncing around in my head what he had just said. Then I got it. As with perhaps thousands of 8th graders before him, DeShawn, overwhelmed by a muddle of research paper terms, had missed the distinction between "bibliography" and "biography." Next lunch period I taught him how to do a bibliography.

Why hadn't I responded to DeShawn sooner? From my point of view, the bibliography was peripheral, a minor part of the report. For him, it was an insur-

mountable barrier. Trapped in my own mistaken assumptions about what he understood and what he needed, it took me a while to even hear him.

I work in an urban school in which 95% of the students are students of color — a dazzling mix of African Americans, Latinos, Filipinos, Samoans, Chinese and Indochinese — and the majority of the teaching staff (like me) is white. Close to 70% of the students are classified as EDY (Educationally Disadvantaged Youth), and despite recent gains, their standardized test scores in reading and math fall below the state average. Although only 13 or 14 years old, many have already been labelled "at-risk," expected to disrupt and fail. When confronted with a difficult assignment, they tend to clutch, assuming that trouble and failure is right around the corner. Too often their questions aren't really answered; rather they are told, "If you'd paid attention earlier, you would know how to do an outline," or "I can't believe an 8th grader doesn't know how to use the library." Their frustration builds and is acted out in class. The initial negative prognosis is confirmed and the cycle continues.

It is within this context that, for three years now, I've assigned I-Search papers to my 8th grade U.S. history classes. The I-Search is a research paper in which

students select their own topics, develop some central questions and then chart the progress of their search for information. The final paper is supposed to include a one page summary of how they went about their research, followed by a seven to ten page report of information, two interviews, a conclusion and a bibliography. It's a task which pushes students to use a host of research and writing skills.

Most students work hard on this assignment. They respond to the challenge and to the opportunity to pick a topic that interests them. "Can I really do a report on Samoa?" "I'm interested in Magic Johnson and H.I.V." "What about 'Stereotypes of Latinos'? Is that an acceptable topic?" As the students realize they can write on something that really concerns them, they click in. Still, many of these same students run into serious problems which need to be solved if they are to remain engaged. They need support and assistance, a jump start to help them get going or keep going. And each one needs something different.

What makes an initially enthusiastic student disengage from a difficult assignment? What are the real difficulties that students face and need to overcome? Looking for some answers to these questions, my colleague, Pirette McKamey, and I decided to have the students in our English-Social Studies core reflect weekly upon their work. Their reflections became mini-journals — an opportunity to voice their concerns and ask for help.

Ms. McKamey and I wanted to create a positive, caring, respectful, and academically challenging environment. We wanted students to get inside their research topics, dig for understanding, analyze the information they discovered, and find their own voices. What became clear was that we had to do more teaching and provide more structure than we had anticipated. Students wanted clear guidelines, more access to skills that could get them started, more guidance on how to turn the difficult corners.

What follows are the stories of four students' experiences with the I-Search, based on their own reflections and our observations during the course of the project. I present them as snapshots to illustrate how explicit instruction in the seemingly "mundane" skills of writing and research can help students find their own voices.

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### Michael: Back To The Basics

Blessed with an easy wit and a sharp intelligence, Michael is an African American student who has nicknamed himself "Marvelous." For Michael, the I-Search was intriguing because he could pick his own topic. And that had to be football, his all-consuming passion. Having just recovered from a broken leg sustained in a Pop Warner football game, he settled on the topic "Football Injuries." Often reluctant to jump into a new assignment, Michael went right to work on his paper, developing questions about his topic and completing a rough draft before anyone else in the class. Adept at carrying out side conversations during class, this time he maintained his focus, making it clear to his classmates that he was too busy to engage in his usual banter. By the second week, however, he was running into difficulties:

*I wrote ten questions and I wrote a 3-page essay rough draft about football injuries. My biggest problem is finding out how to put a I-Search together. Like what order to put the papers in, should I put glossary words in, or do I just put a report together with a cover? I look and look, but there are no books on my topic in the library. I also wanted to write about myself, you know, a little cover story on my injury. Can I do that?*

Michael needed to do more library research to find out about football injuries other than his own. He didn't realize that the library contained a periodical section, or that he could check out sports magazines like *Sports Illustrated*.

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***Students wanted clear guidelines, more access to skills that could get them started, more guidance on how to turn the difficult corners.***

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He also needed to find a balance between writing his own story and reporting on injuries in the National Football League. His rough draft, although written from the heart, focused entirely on his own injury. Having never done a research paper before, he was confused about how to organize his report. Where should the part about his own injury go? Where should the stuff about Bo Jackson go? He wanted to



know if it was all right to copy some of Gayle Sayers' rushing statistics from a sports encyclopedia. He had very little experience constructing an outline or clustering information.

Michael's difficulties exposed a more widespread problem. Many students were floundering because they needed more instruction on the "basics" of the project. I fought off feelings of frustration. After all, we had done "mini-reports" earlier in the year to prepare for the I-Search. For three days before the I-Search, we had modeled interviews and developed an outline for an imaginary I-Search report about our school. I had used the overhead projector to demonstrate the difference between copying from an encyclopedia and putting information into your own words. Students had the opportunity to look over a sampling of last year's I-Search reports. But none of this was enough. This project was a stretch — a challenge — and many students were simply overwhelmed. They couldn't recall what we had discussed about outlining, they were confused about what questions to ask in an interview, they didn't know how to begin. The earlier lessons had been done before the project started; now they had to be reinforced within the context of the I-Search.

Taking a deep breath, I decided to spend three additional days teaching and discussing some "dos and don'ts" of how to organize a research paper. We went over again how to do an outline or cluster — this time moving immediately from the lesson into developing outlines for their own reports. Seven students volunteered to read the first two paragraphs of their reports, demystifying the issue of "how do we start." Students shared note-taking techniques and helped each other think up interview questions. The relief in the class was evident.

Michael eventually decided to compare his injury and its aftermath to the experiences of star players in the National Football League. He also developed a set of questions to ask his parents about their reactions to his injury. Looking through back issues of *Sports Illustrated*, Michael found two or three articles about football injuries. He created a cluster about different types of football injuries and found information about each of them. Not knowing how to type and with no computer available at home, he spent day after day in the library, carefully writing out his report by hand. A month into the project he could report substantial progress:

*I done reports on knee injuries, head injuries etc. I wrote about Gale Sayers' injuries and my own injury and those of a lot of other people. I also have interviewed my mom and dad and asked them what were they feeling when I got hurt and I asked them how they felt about me coming back and playing again with a screw in my knee, but you will just have to wait to see how good it is, and I'm really doing well with this report.*

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### **Many students were floundering because they needed more instruction on the "basics" of the project.**

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Michael still had a lot of work to do. With no subheads or paragraphs, plenty of run-on sentences and numerous spelling errors, he faced a massive job of editing. By this time, though, he was so invested in the paper that he shrugged off the extra work. After we worked together editing a few pages, he jumped into this tedious job with the same enthusiasm he had for the earlier work. Michael had accomplished a great deal — and he knew it.

*One thing I learned in doing this I-Search is that you have to put a lot into it, because what you put into it is what you will get out of it. Doing this project I had to go to different people and different places for information and knowing how to put the whole thing together was the hardest part of all, but I knew I had a job to do and I wasn't going to stop until it was done.*

#### **Annie: The Library Problem**

Annie had puzzled me from the beginning of the year. Diligent and responsible, she turned in most homework assignments and made sure to complete all her classwork. But at the same time, she let me know — by the notes she passed to friends in class, by her vacant stare when I asked a question, by the carelessness of much of her work — that she wasn't all there, that she wasn't all that interested.

Annie knew from the beginning that she wanted to write a report about her home country of Samoa. She stayed after class to copy down all the due dates for various segments of the project. "I'm gonna get an A on this one, Mr. Roth." But she did very little work for



the first two weeks. Her first written reflection sent out the warning signals:

*I really need help on how to start. My topic is on Samoa and I am doing really bad because I don't know how to start. The reason is because the books I have are only travel books. Those were the only books they had at the library about Samoa. It's hard because I don't understand these travel books. I am going to bring them into class tomorrow and let you see them. I took some notes from the encyclopedia and it's not much. So really, it's the researching that's hard.*

Of course the research was hard for her. The school library had nothing on Samoa. The nearest public library had a few glitzy travel books about the "island paradise." The encyclopedia had a short entry on Samoa, written in 1965. When she asked the librarian to copy something for her, the material came back with the wrong pages copied. Annie could have just written down a few things from each of the books and cobbled together a mediocre report. But this was not the exciting project she had in mind. Something was wrong, something she did not know how to fix. Annie voiced her concerns:

*I haven't done nothing yet but Ms. McKamey and I started on my questions. I haven't done anything because the books I have are very difficult to get some information.*

By this time she and Ms. McKamey had connected, and had worked up a set of questions about her topic. What did she really want to know? What interested her? What was the focus of her report? Even though this represented progress, it wasn't enough to get Annie going. Those books had her paralyzed. Every time she looked at them, she lost direction. She needed an alternative or the report was going nowhere. Where could she get information that reflected the reality of her culture? Ms. McKamey urged Annie to focus more on interviews with family members and spend less time worrying about getting the information from the outdated books she had found.

Together they agreed on a list of interview questions, including: "What kind of transportation is used in Samoa?" "How hard is it to find a job there?" and "What are some things about life in Samoa that are different from here in the U.S.?" Ms. McKamey also helped Annie get the first words of her report down

on paper. Once she was liberated from the travel books, Annie realized that her family stories were invaluable resources. Talking to her uncle, she learned all about the matai system in which chiefs rule over village life. She learned about the downturn in the tuna industry and rising unemployment in American Samoa. She gathered information about the strict discipline in Samoan schools. The project took off.

On the day the report was due, Annie got to class before anyone else, her completed paper in hand. It turned out to be remarkable — filled with factual information about Samoa as well as vivid accounts of her own family's experiences, topped off with carefully-drawn maps and a beautiful cover, the result of hours of work in the computer lab. Annie's introduction focused on why this report had been important for her:

*I think learning and writing about your own culture is a good thing for someone my age to do. I thought it would be a good thing to do a report on Samoa because I don't know a lot about it. I am proud that I am doing my I-Search on my own culture.*

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#### **Anthony: I Hate Projects**

A few students never got into the I-Search. For them, it was just another assignment, one with a lot of work attached. Overwhelmed and frustrated, they were seemingly immune to assistance, whether during class time or in one-on-one conferences.

Anthony is an African American student who lives in one of the most dangerous, high-crime sections of the city. He has spent a good deal of his young life defending himself, avoiding drug dealers and watch-

ing his back. Once when I drove him back to his house after school, he realized that he'd forgotten his keys and was too nervous to wait on his doorstep for his mom to come home from work. He had been jumped by some older boys the day before, and he was afraid they might still be looking for him.

Despite being one of the shortest boys in the whole school, Anthony commanded total respect through his personality, intelligence and humor. While he did well in the 7th grade, he seemed preoccupied as an 8th grader, unable to focus on his schoolwork. Although he had spurts in which he handed in homework and participated well in class, he was also frequently absent or late and his work suffered.

Anthony did not like the I-Search. He picked a familiar topic, the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, and seemed bored from the beginning. His first reflection was filled with complaints:

*I have two books but I have done nothing but I am reading the books. My problems are how can I do this. I have problems on how to do projects but I want to do it on the computer but the computer lab is never open. I heard part of "I Have a Dream" speech, but that's about all I've done.*

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**Perhaps Anthony needed to address the difficult circumstances of his own life, focusing his I-search on the issues in his neighborhood, combining interviews and his own perspective.**

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Since Anthony was one of my teacher's aides, we spent a good deal of time together. Disturbed by the early warning signs of trouble, I had a series of talks with him in which we worked out an initial outline. I provided him with three young adult books on Dr. King. We worked out a schedule for time in the computer lab. But things didn't really improve:

*I have read some of my books. I have wrote down some of the things I learned about him. I hate doing reports but my grade depends on this project so I*

*am going to do some of the things that I need to do and more.*

Anthony made it clear that he was doing the I-Search under extreme duress, motivated solely by concern over his grade. When one issue was addressed — like doing an outline — another issue immediately popped up. While he worked intermittently in class, his mother reported that he did absolutely no work at home. After the Easter vacation, he could only report that things had deteriorated further:

*Over the vacation I didn't do anything because I want new books. My problem is that I really have no idea what to do. I don't think I can put it in a project form but if I try maybe I can.*

What was wrong with the books he already had? Anthony said that they "didn't have enough information." When I showed him three or four sections from one of the books with precisely the information he needed, he told me that he had taken notes from those sections already but his mother had lost his notes. When I offered him help on redoing the notes, he insisted he could do the report himself. When I asked him what he meant by "I don't think I can put it in a project form," he said he didn't know in what order to put the various sections. When I explained the order to him, he complained that the whole thing was just too much work. Anthony was a resister:

*I didn't learn anything. I know MLK did marches and speeches, that's the only thing my books talk about. I hated the project. It took away most of my time, nothing helped me solve my problems. I just wrote things down on a piece of paper. My weakness is doing reports. I can't put words out on paper except when I like to do projects. Other than that I hate projects.*

Looking back, I can see where we may have gone wrong. The Martin Luther King report was a bad idea from the beginning — been there, done that. Perhaps Anthony needed to address the difficult circumstances of his own life, focusing his I-search on the issues in his neighborhood, combining interviews and his own perspective. Maybe that would have clicked. But I was not agile enough to send him in that direction. In the end, the best I could do was hang in with him, refusing to let the I-Search define his whole year. There would be other projects, other chances.

### Carolina: Finding Her own Words

Carolina loved to write first drafts. She would hand in long, flowing passages filled with emotion and personality, sometimes on topic, sometimes off. It was the revising she hated. For her, writing seemed to be an immediate form of expression, not the kind of thing you looked at again, worked over, restructured.

Carolina jumped at the chance to do the report. This was an opportunity to uncover more about her Mexican roots. Proud and conscious of her identity, she wanted to dig deeper. "I know I want to do something about Mexico, but I'm not sure what. I'm going to really think about it." Two days later, she announced that her report would be on the rebellion in Chiapas.

Each day she had another question about Chiapas: When did the rebellion start? Why was the government so mean to the indigenous people? Who was Commander Marcos? She was deep into her search, determined to understand every aspect of the situation. That's why her next reflection took me a bit by surprise.

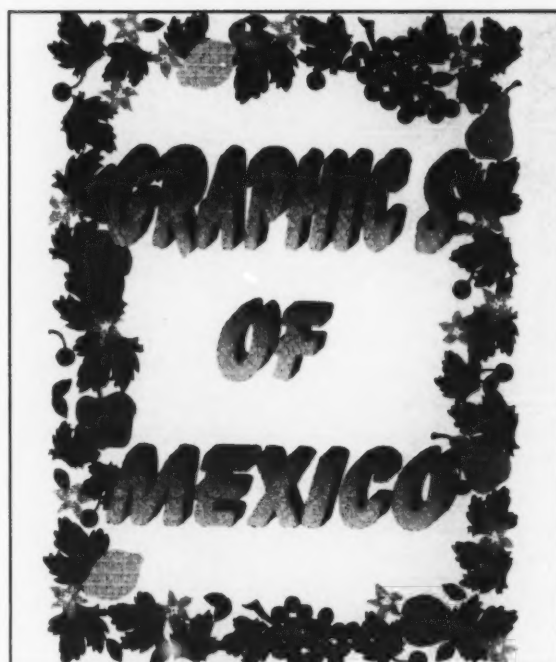
*It has been fun working with my topic, specially looking for information. I have done my interviews and it's really fun. But I think I'm getting left behind. I really will like if you can help me. I went down to the library and they didn't have nothing about Chiapas. So if you have any kind of information, like maps, graphics, books or newspaper I will be glad to look at it. There's not that much information about Chiapas. Is it o.k. if I change my topic to just Mexico?*

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***"There's not that much information about Chiapas. Is it o.k. if I change my topic to just Mexico?"***

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It wasn't O.K. Like Annie, Carolina was faced with the "library problem" — no books about her topic — and she was thinking of heading for the safer ground of a generic report on Mexico. We sat down and talked about bookstores in the Mission District where she could find information on Chiapas. We talked about news magazines and how to use them. I agreed to give her some of my own material on Chiapas. Carolina decided to continue her search — and her report began to take shape.



From Carolina's Report on Chiapas

*I bought a book and also had some of Mr. Roth's books. With Mr. Roth's books, I took notes but I seem not really to understand. I asked my parents if they had some information. They bought me a book in Spanish, but it was written by Zapatistas. I read the book and took notes. Now I finished the book. I just need to start writing my report.*

Carolina now had to decipher a series of densely-written political tracts and newspaper commentaries. On the day we did our "anti-copying" lesson, focused on note-taking techniques, she stayed after class to ask for assistance: Could I help her take notes from one of her books? Could I review her third attempt at an outline? She wanted this report to "have everything correct." We worked together for an hour as she took notes on the Zapatista program, putting it into her own words. She realized that she could pull out the main points, even if she didn't understand every single word. Her confidence growing, she went home to take notes about the North American Free Trade Agreement.

The next day I watched in amazement as she moved to a corner of the library and sat quietly for two straight periods, painstakingly putting information into her own words. While other students rushed to get words on paper, she read every page of her books

and magazines, laboring over the more difficult sections. For Carolina the I-Search wasn't just another classroom assignment. It was a way to understand her own story, and she was determined to "get it" and then communicate it as clearly as possible. At one point, I stopped by her table in the library just in time to hear her explain in detail to two other Latino students why the campesinos in Chiapas had rebelled.

In the end, Carolina understood a great deal. Her report detailed the history and background of the rebellion and grappled with the complexities of economic crisis and political turmoil in Mexico. She included insightful interviews with family members who had once lived in Chiapas, providing their perspective on the hardships of life in the area and the oppression faced by indigenous people in the region. And she wrote with a passion about why people in Chiapas risked their lives to stand up against the Mexican government:

*If you look back in history you can see that everything that happened in the past is happening now. Zapata, Pancho Villa and Marcos have placed their names in a history book of people that fought against their government. I understand why many people get in rebellion against Mexico, but especially the main things that they need and ask for. The government*

*doesn't help them, but instead answers back with an army full of weapons and attacks people on Christmas Eve, brutally killing people. Those are the things that make me mad.*

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Out of a class of 31 students, 29 turned in their reports. Some were a few days late or put together at the last minute: Marissa copied her report on Laos from the encyclopedia, Jennifer handed in a hastily-done, superficial report on Vietnam, and Brenda's report on Queen Nefertiti never really got going. And, of course, there was Anthony. But there was also Luis, writing passionately about his family's experiences during the Salvadoran civil war; Crystal discovering the poetry of Maya Angelou; Demario wading his way through the complexities of World War II; Marlon speculating on why more African-Americans don't play soccer; Rachel recounting her uncle's stories of growing up in Leyte.

Knowing how to do an outline or where to put the table of contents was not, of course, the heart and soul of a successful research paper. Students needed to find a way to put their own stamp on their project. But in order to get to that place, they needed more explicit instruction. Michael needed to grasp how to organize his report before he could go on with his harrowing tale of broken legs, damaged knees and assorted football injuries. Annie needed some clarity on how to do interviews before she could bring her family's Samoan experience to life. And Carolina needed the discipline to take hours of notes as she struggled to articulate her passion about Chiapas. As we understood more clearly the obstacles they faced, we were able to respond with more patience, more purpose, and more effective teaching. As our students dug into the writing process and developed their skills, they came up with work that was truly their own.

*Robert Roth teaches social studies at Luther Burbank Middle School in San Francisco, CA. He is a teacher consultant with the Bay Area Writing Project.*

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